

## Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect

# Brill's Studies in Intellectual History

*General Editor*

Han van Ruler, Erasmus University Rotterdam

*Founded by*

Arjo Vanderjagt

*Editorial Board*

C. S. Celenza, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

M. Colish, Yale University

J. I. Israel, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

A. Koba, University of Tokyo

M. Mugnai, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

W. Otten, University of Chicago

VOLUME 225

*The titles published in this series are listed at [brill.com/bsih](http://brill.com/bsih)*

# Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect

A Case Study in 15th-Century  
Fides-Ratio Controversy

*By*

K.M. Ziebart



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON  
2014

*Cover illustration:* Satirical woodcut illustration of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), cardinal, theologian, and envoy of Pope Eugene IV, as “the Pope’s ‘Hercules’ against the Germans”. Published by Georg Rhaw of Wittenberg (1488–1548).

Penn Provenance Project. Penn Libraries call number: GC5 K9893 538b.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ziebart, K.M.

Nicolaus Cusanus on faith and the intellect : a case study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy / by K.M. Ziebart.

pages cm. — (Brill’s studies in intellectual history, ISSN 0920-8607 ; VOLUME 225)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-25213-4 (hardback : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-90-04-25214-1 (e-book) 1. Nicholas, of Cusa, Cardinal, 1401–1464. 2. Faith and reason—History of doctrines—Middle Ages, 600–1500. I. Title.

B765.N54Z54 2013

231'.042092—dc23

2013033960

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual “Brill” typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see [www.brill.com/brill-typeface](http://www.brill.com/brill-typeface).

ISSN 0920-8607

ISBN 978-90-04-25213-4 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-25214-1 (e-book)

Copyright 2014 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill, Global Oriental, Hotei Publishing, IDC Publishers and Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by Koninklijke Brill NV provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910, Danvers, MA 01923, USA.

Fees are subject to change.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For Mom  
(finally)

« Credere enim non capitur nisi in vivo intellectu »

from « Alleluia. Veni, Sancte Spiritus »

h *Sermo* 285, 10 6–7

Brixen, 1457

## CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgements .....	xi
List of Abbreviations .....	xiii
Introduction .....	1
Methodological Considerations & Organization of Study .....	1
Nicolaus Cusanus and fides-ratio Dialectic in the Fifteenth Century .....	4
Representations of Faith and Reason in Cusan Thought and the Appearance of a Problem .....	6
<i>Mysteria fidei</i> : Faith and Reason in Book III of <i>De docta         ignorantia</i> .....	15
Faith and Reason in the Early Sermons .....	24
Previous Scholarship on the Relationship of Faith and Reason in Cusan Thought .....	33

## PART ONE

### FAITH AND REASON IN THE DEBATES AND CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE RECEPTION OF CUSANUS' WORKS BY HIS CONTEMPORARIES

1 The Cusanus-Wenck Debate .....	53
Wenck and Conciliarism: The Political Motives Behind the Debate .....	55
Wenck's Opposition to Lay Mysticism .....	56
John of Gelnhausen and the Origin of the Debate .....	60
Wenck's Response to <i>De docta ignorantia</i> : The <i>De ignota         litteratura</i> .....	63
Eckhardian/Beghardian "heresy" in <i>De docta ignorantia</i> .....	72
Destruction of the Aristotelian Philosophy .....	81
<i>De ignota litteratura</i> as a Document in the History of Fifteenth-Century Sectarian Religious Controversy .....	85
Cusanus' Response to Johannes Wenck: The <i>Apologia doctae         ignorantiae</i> and <i>Idiota</i> Treatises .....	88
The <i>Apologia doctae ignorantiae</i> .....	88

	The <i>Idiota</i> Dialogues as Further Response .....	105
	<i>Idiota de sapientia</i> .....	108
	<i>Idiota de mente</i> .....	118
	Chapter 1 Conclusion: The Cusanus-Wenck Debate, <i>Apologia</i> , and <i>Idiota</i> Treatises .....	134
2	The Tegernsee Debate .....	137
	Background of the Debate .....	139
	The University of Vienna and Reform in Austria .....	139
	Conciliarism in Aggsbach's Criticism .....	149
	Reception of Cusanus' Works in the Monasteries, and the Development of the Debate .....	153
	Vincent's Tractate against Cusanus: The <i>Impugnatorium</i> <i>laudatorii doctae ignorantiae</i> .....	176
	Cusanus' <i>De visione Dei</i> .....	188
	Chapter 2 Conclusion: Evaluating the Tegernsee Debate .....	195
	Conclusion to Part I: Cusanus' Debates with Wenck and Aggsbach against the Background of Fifteenth-Century Theological Controversy .....	197

## PART TWO

BEYOND THE DEBATES: FAITH AND REASON AS MIRRORED  
IN CUSANUS' PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

3	The Philosopher and the Idiot: The Role of Aristotelian Philosophy in the Philosophy and Theology of Cusanus .....	201
	Previous Views of Cusanus' Relationship to Aristotle .....	201
	References to Aristotle in Cusanus .....	204
	References to Aristotle in the Sermons .....	206
	References in the Sermons to the <i>Ethics</i> .....	208
	References in the Sermons to the <i>Metaphysics</i> .....	210
	References to Aristotle in the Treatises .....	213
	Aristotle and the <i>coincidentia oppositorum</i> .....	215
	On the Subject of Substance .....	218
	On the Subject of Forms/Universals .....	222
	On the Unity of the Intellectual Tradition .....	226
	Chapter 3 Conclusion: Rethinking Cusanus and the Aristotelian Philosophy .....	228



4	The Articulation of Faith and Reason in Cusan Predication ....	237
	Sermon 60: <i>Ego resuscitabo eum in novissimo die</i> (1446) .....	239
	Sermon 124: <i>Venit filius hominis</i> (1452) .....	240
	Sermon 129: <i>Filii huius saeculi</i> (1453) .....	241
	Sermon 130: <i>Intravit Jesus</i> (1453) .....	244
	Sermon 133: <i>Ego si exaltatus fuere</i> (1453) .....	248
	Sermon 134: <i>Credidit ipse</i> (1453) .....	250
	Sermon 135: <i>Gaudete et exsultate</i> (1453) .....	251
	Sermon 143: <i>Nunc dimittis</i> (1454) .....	253
	Sermon 148: <i>Miserere mei fili David</i> (1454) .....	253
	Sermon 189: <i>Qui manducat hunc panem vivet in aeternum</i> (1455)	257
	Sermon 193: <i>Relictis omnibus secuti sunt eum</i> (1455) .....	262
	Sermon 245: <i>Crucifixus resurrexit</i> (1456) .....	263
	Sermon 268: <i>Sic currite, ut comprehendatis</i> (1457) .....	264
	Sermon 275: <i>Non sumus ancillae filii</i> (1457) .....	269
	Sermon 289: <i>Sic currite, ut comprehendatis</i> (1459) .....	271
	Chapter 4 Conclusion: Faith and Intellectual Fulfilment in the Later Sermons .....	276
	Conclusion: Conflict or Coherence? The Fusion of Faith and Reason in Cusan Philosophy and Theology .....	279

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Chronological List of Letters and Works Related to the "Tegernsee" Debate on Mystical Theology .....	287
Appendix 2	Edition and Translation of Excerpt from Johannes Wenck's Letter to John of Gelnhausen, 1442 (Wenck's Summary of the 17 'proposals' of Hans Franckfurter) .....	291
Appendix 3	Translation of Excerpt from Letter of Vincent of Aggsbach to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim), February 25, 1451 .....	294
Appendix 4	Translation of Excerpt from the <i>Impugnatorium Laudatorii</i> in Letter of Vincent of Aggsbach to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim), Dec. 19, 1454 .....	295
Appendix 5	Translation of Excerpt from Letter of Vincent of Aggsbach to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim), June 26, 1459 ...	302
Appendix 6	Translation of Letter of Vincent of Aggsbach to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim), Die 8. Michaelis, 1460 .....	306

Appendix 7 Letter of Thomas Papler (Prior of Aggsbach) to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim) .....	307
Appendix 8 Translation of Notes Made by John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim) and Leopold Wydemann Summarizing the Stages of the Debate and Listing the Respective Major Treatises and Letters Involved .....	309
Bibliography .....	313
Index .....	325

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following study comprises a revised version of my PhD dissertation, which I researched and wrote at the University of Freiburg, Germany, and subsequently defended there in January, 2010. The subject of my doctoral research was the relation between faith and reason in the works of Nicolaus Cusanus. This topic recommended itself for study in part because *fides-ratio* controversy was very characteristic of the late Middle Ages, and in part because it is a theme that figures strongly in the life and works of Cusanus. Above and beyond these things, however, the subject attracted me as one of philosophical import in its own right: For to investigate the relation between faith and reason is to address the question of the limits of human understanding and, by extension, the bounds of philosophical discourse. It is to seek both the beginning and the end of human knowledge, its necessary presuppositions and ultimate limits, as well as the nature of that knowledge and its relation to our universe. It is, in short, a question intimately connected with epistemology and metaphysics, and therefore a topic not merely of interest to theologians or historians of medieval philosophy but, I would argue, one of perennial importance to philosophy.

The guiding methodological principle of my doctoral research was that the philosophical contribution of a thinker cannot be fully appreciated without taking into account the context in which he lived and worked. With this in mind, my aim was to produce a study of Nicolaus Cusanus that would not only deepen scholarly understanding of his particular philosophical contribution, but hopefully also add something to our picture of the intellectual milieu of the late fifteenth century. In this connection especially, I am deeply grateful to my doctoral supervisor and mentor, Prof. Dr. Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen, whose erudition and scientific rigour as a historian of ideas were a fundamental source of guidance to me throughout the course of my research. I am also indebted to Prof. Dr. Peter Walter, for his gracious and unstinting support as my co-supervisor. Nor would the realization of this project have been possible without the generous academic and financial support of the University of Freiburg *Promotionskolleg* "Lern- und Lebensräume: Kloster, Hof, Universität. Komparatistische Mediävistik 500–1600", of which I was a member from 2005–2008, with special thanks to Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans-Jochen Schiewer and

Prof. Dr. Felix Heinzer, as well as to Dr. Judith Theben and Dr. Carolin Schuchert. Lastly, I would like to thank my former Freiburg colleagues and good friends JProf. Dr. Nadja Germann and Dr. Laurent Cesalli, without whose knowledge, technical advice, friendship, and unflagging moral support during the composition of this work I would surely not have prevailed.

Meredith Ziebart  
Baltimore, March 2013

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AC</i>	<i>Acta Cusana</i> . Meuthen, E., ed. Hamburg: Meiner, 1976–.
<i>BGPTM</i>	<i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters</i> . Münster: Aschendorff, 1895–.
<i>h</i>	Nicolai de Cusa <i>Opera omnia</i> iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis. Hamburg: Meiner, 1932–.
<i>MFCG</i>	<i>Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft</i> . Trier: Paulinus, 1969–.
<i>MM</i>	<i>Miscellanea Mediaevalia</i> . Veröffentlichungen des Thomas-Instituts der Universität zu Köln. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962–.
<i>RSA</i>	Renaissance Society of America



## INTRODUCTION

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS & ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

As mentioned above, my research was guided by a historico-philosophical methodological principle. This orientation has determined the organization of the present study. Accordingly, Part I focuses on how the development of Cusanus' position on faith and reason grew out of his involvement in and response to debates and controversies in his immediate milieu. Because letters and documents show that certain of his treatises were part of a broader discourse directly relating to this subject which took place between Cusanus and others, the historical background is examined before the treatises themselves, so that the significance of those discourses can then be integrated into interpretation of the texts.

There are two notable cases where controversy surrounded Cusanus' works, and out of which debates erupted, namely, the debate between Cusanus and the Heidelberg theologian Johannes Wenck, incited by the latter's composition of a polemical treatise against *De docta ignorantia*, and the so-called 'Tegernseer Mystikerstreit', at the centre of which stood a debate between Cusanus and a Carthusian named Vincent of Aggsbach. Since certain of Cusanus' treatises were either directly or indirectly involved in these debates—namely, the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, *Idiota de sapientia*, *Idiota de mente*, and *De visione Dei*—we will look at them in this context, in order to see how they either incited or responded to specific issues and criticisms. Wenck's and Aggsbach's respective treatises against Cusanus—the *De ignota litteratura* and *Impugnatorium doctae ignorantiae*—will also be examined in detail, as will the relevant correspondence. (This section is supported by the inclusion—in the "Appendices"—of a number of crucial texts relating to these debates, in Latin with English translation, which have been previously unavailable to general readership.)

Building upon the information gained in Part I, Part II then seeks to develop a more comprehensive picture of Cusanus' systematic philosophical and theological response over time to the issues that were the focus of those debates. First is a detailed analysis of Cusanus' evaluation, use, and transformation of Aristotle across his speculative and predicative works. The final section of our study comprises a close examination of Cusanus'

doctrine of faith and reason as found in his later sermons, as it is here that we find his fullest and most sophisticated development of his teaching on this subject. Once the issue has been thus examined across his oeuvre, its various presentations will be brought together and considered once more in terms of the broader historico-philosophical context.

The fact that previous studies have tended to limit themselves to either a systematic or historical analysis has resulted in certain important connections having been overlooked. For example, studies of the Wenck debate have tended to treat it as an isolated incident with no reverberations in Cusanus' work beyond the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*. By looking at this debate in the broader context of Cusanus' developing position on faith and reason, we will see how Cusanus continues to respond to issues from that debate in his subsequent *Idiota* treatises.

It will also become evident that the Wenck and Tegernsee debates, though apparently dealing with different issues, actually share many common concerns and belong to a larger, ongoing discourse about the role of logic and metaphysics in theology. This approach furthermore sheds light on the discussions of Aristotle in Cusanus' later works, showing how these respond to earlier challenges he faced regarding the compatibility of his doctrine with the Aristotelian tradition. By adopting this approach to Cusanus' thought, we hope to produce an account of his place in the fifteenth-century debates on faith and reason which both accurately reflects the texts and brings to light some previously unseen facts.

One thing that will be immediately apparent from the Table of Contents is that this book contains no exhaustive, systematic account of *De docta ignorantia*, or of the Cusan corpus, or even of all the works typically considered to be the Cardinal's 'most important'. While this may be regarded as a defect by some, I can only say that it is the result of deliberate choice. Such works abound in the literature, and it is my view (rightly or wrongly) that Cusanus research at this point in history is little served by yet another comprehensive, systematic explication of his thought. This book admittedly assumes some prior acquaintance with the ideas of Nicolaus Cusanus; however, as there are a number of introductory works to the Cardinal's life and philosophy available, I felt it would be redundant to reproduce such information here.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., Bellitto, C. et al. eds. *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004; the introduction to Bond, L., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997; or, recently translated



What is yet relatively lacking are studies that seek to interpret his doctrines within the specific contexts of his concrete engagements and interactions with his contemporaries (though this is increasingly being recognized as a scholarly desideratum). The Cardinal's liminal position with respect to the philosophical tradition—working as he did on the eve of the Reformation, neither truly a scholastic nor a renaissance thinker—has at times led commentators to ascribe excessive novelty to his doctrines, as though they “erupted spontaneously” out of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the peculiarly intellectual nature of Cusanus' mystical theology has too often been summarily attributed to the author's proclivity for Neoplatonic philosophy—a simplification which glosses over the network of influences and concerns which informed his mystical doctrine.

While there have been excellent historical studies of Cusanus' church-political activities, few analyses of his philosophical works have similarly sought to situate his speculative doctrines within the 15th-century Austro-German context in which, and for which, the majority of them were written; and as a consequence, the fifteenth-century German Cusanus remains relatively unknown to us. It is to this characterization that we therefore seek to make our contribution with the following work. While there are treatises that touch on issues related to faith and reason which will not be treated here (such as *De pace fidei*, or *De coniecturis*, for example), we find it most fruitful to concentrate on those which contain discussions that can be directly tied to debates with his contemporaries as well on works (such as the sermons, the letters, and treatises like the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, *Idiota de sapientia*, and *Idiota de mente*) which have to-date received less attention in the research.

As the main subject of this study is Cusanus' attempt to resolve the tension between faith and reason, some preliminary work is required; first, to clarify the problem itself (i.e. what is meant by ‘faith’ and ‘reason’, and what is the nature of this tension between them?); second, to gauge how

---

into English, Meuthen, E. *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> As David Albertson put it in his recent paper “Mystical Philosophy in the Fifteenth Century: New Directions in Research on Nicholas of Cusa” in *Religion Compass* Volume 4, Issue 8 (2010), 471–485, p. 476. Albertson speaks in this regard of the emergence of a “third wave” of Cusanus research: “The most exciting advances in Cusanus research build upon the momentum of this third wave. Rather than attempting to establish the absolute novelty of his philosophical achievement, scholars study how the cardinal's interests fit together organically, how his writings developed differentially over time, and how his synthesis of medieval traditions produced sometimes modern effects.”

and to what extent this tension is perceptible in the works of Cusanus; and third, to establish whether we find in Cusan thought a concerted attempt to address it. To this end, the following introductory materials will outline some early expressions of the faith-reason dialectic in Cusanus' sermons and especially in his treatise *De docta ignorantia*, as it is the views set forth here which really instigate the debates in which he will later become involved. A section reviewing previous scholarship on the subject of faith and reason in Cusan thought will follow, in order to situate our research vis-à-vis the *status quo*. As this necessarily presupposes a certain degree of familiarity with the literature on Cusanus, non-specialist readers may wish to pass directly from here to Part I of the main study.

#### NICOLAUS CUSANUS AND FIDES-RATIO DIALECTIC IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between faith and reason had always been a troublesome issue for medieval theologians: because the perfect nature of revealed truth stands in inevitable tension with the imperfection of the intellect which seeks to grasp it, doubts concerning the compatibility of the two, and the usefulness of reason for theology were unavoidable. As the rational sciences nevertheless continued to develop throughout the scholastic era, so too increased this tension, which in the latter part of the fifteenth century became particularly acute. By this time, a dispute over fundamental methodological principles—known as the *Wegestreit*, or “conflict over the ways”—had developed in the universities. This divided scholars into *antiqui*—those who defended the intimate connection of philosophy and theology—and *moderni*—those who fundamentally questioned the ability of logic to prove the message of scripture. It was the latter party who asserted the authority of faith over reason in matters of scriptural interpretation. Though this movement had begun as a debate in Arts faculties over how to comment on the texts of Aristotle, because many of the matters discussed concerned the soul, human knowledge, and knowledge of God, the debate came also to divide theologians.<sup>4</sup> History was to favour

---

<sup>3</sup> All references to Cusanus' sermons or treatises in the following study refer to the Heidelberg *opera omnia* (*Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*. Iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem ed. Hamburg: Meiner, 1932–). English translations in this study are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hoenen, M. “*Via Antiqua* and *Via Moderna* in the fifteenth Century: Doctrinal, Institutional, and Church Political Factors in the *Wegestreit*” in Friedman, R. and Nielsen, L.,

the *via moderna*, or “modern way”—philosophically, insofar as its work foreshadowed the imminent secularization of philosophy, and theologically, in that the increasing importance which came to be attached to faith would culminate eventually in the Reformation.

While the *Wegestreit* was a phenomenon confined to the universities, its underlying tensions reverberated well beyond the academic realm. Cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464) provides an excellent opportunity to study the effects of this tension outside the university world due to the multi-faceted nature of his career, which—in addition to the speculative philosophical and theological writings for which he is most well-known—included extensive pastoral, administrative, church-political, and reform engagements. One clear example of this is Cusanus’ connection with the *devotio moderna*, or Modern Devotion—a lay reform movement faithful to the tenets of the *via moderna* which flourished in the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This brotherhood, which rejected scholasticism and emphasized the cultivation of a direct, personal relationship with scripture, produced texts written in an informal, dialogical literary style. The influence of the *via moderna* on Cusanus can be seen both in his lifelong support of the *devotio* movement as a church administrator and in stylistic resemblances with a number of his treatises.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Cusanus’ positive attitude towards many of the techniques of academic scholarship is apparent in his ongoing preoccupation with the logic of the trinity, which he sought on many occasions

---

eds., *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003, 9–36. For more on the *Wegestreit*, cf. also Hoenen, M. “Zurück zu Autorität und Tradition. Geistesgeschichtliche Hintergründe des Traditionalismus an den spätmittelalterlichen Universitäten” in *Herbst des Mittelalters? Fragen Zur Bewertung Des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*. M. Pickave and J. Aertsen, eds. (*Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 31) Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 133–146; and *ibid.*, “Secundum vocem concordare, sensu tamen discrepare.” Der Streit um die Deutung des Aristoteles an der Universität Ingolstadt im späten 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhundert” in Fidora, A., ed. *Politischer Aristotelismus und Religion in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007, 67–87.

<sup>5</sup> Cusanus’ support of the *Devotio* movement is attested to in part by the existence of the so-called “Bursa Cusana”—funds allocated in Cusanus’ will for the founding of a school to house and provide education for twenty impoverished students in the Netherlands. This school came to be founded in Deventer, which was the centre of the *Devotio moderna* movement. Cf. Hoenen, Maarten J.F.M. “Ut pia testatoris voluntas observetur: Die Stiftung der Bursa Cusana zu Deventer” in *Conflict and reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*. Inigo Bocken, ed. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 53–73. On stylistic similarities between Cusanus and *Devotio* writings, cf. Borsche, Tilman. “Reden unter Brüdern : Diskurstheoretische Bedingungen der Konkordanz bei Nikolaus von Kues” in *Conflict and reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*. Inigo Bocken, ed. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 9–27.

to clarify.<sup>6</sup> It has also been generally recognized that Cusanus' philosophy is deeply imbued with the scholastic tradition and, to a lesser extent, that he "shared the scholastics' fascination with Aristotle".<sup>7</sup> His work is heavily indebted to the school of Chartres and there are clear links between Cusanus and the Albertist school of the *via antiqua* at Cologne, where he studied under Heymericus de Campo.<sup>8</sup> It is also likely that Cusanus had direct contact with the teachings of the *moderni*, as he studied (albeit briefly) at the University of Heidelberg, which was at the time a centre of nominalism, dominated by the philosophy of Marsilius of Inghen.

However, being situated outside the mainstream of philosophical and theological discourse, and owing no explicit loyalty to either the *moderni* or *antiqui* of the universities, Cusanus' attitude towards the issues that propelled the *Wegestreit* is less polarized and reflects a more personal development of the various influences prevalent in his time. Furthermore, the degree to which Cusanus emphasized either faith or reason tends to bear a close practical relationship to the type of work he was engaged in at the time. As a consequence, his own formulation of the *fides-ratio* dialectic is complex and defies easy characterization. It is nevertheless precisely this complexity which makes him such a characteristically fifteenth-century thinker.

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF FAITH AND REASON IN CUSAN THOUGHT AND THE APPEARANCE OF A PROBLEM

In an essay from 2006, Albert Dahm remarked that debate amongst scholars over the role of faith and reason in Cusan thought "can by no means be regarded as settled",<sup>9</sup> drawing this conclusion from comparison of two then recently-published Cusanus studies, Kurt Flasch's *Nikolaus von Kues*,

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, the opusculum *De aequalitate* is concerned primarily with clarification of the trinity through logical means; and it has been observed that this text relies heavily on traditional, scholastic-Aristotelian sources, such as Aquinas. On this text, cf. Cranz, F. Edward. "The *De aequalitate* and *De principio* of Nicholas of Cusa" in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson, eds. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2000, pp. 61–70.

<sup>7</sup> Moffitt Watts, Pauline. *Nicolaus Cusanus. A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man*. Leiden: Brill, 1982, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> On this little-known thinker and his relation to Cusanus, cf. e.g. Ziebart, K.M. "Heymeric of Camp" in Lagerlund, H. ed. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011, 473–476.

<sup>9</sup> Dahm, A., "Vernunft und Glaube in den Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues" in *MFCG* 31. Trier: Paulinus, 2006, 245–273, p. 246.

*Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, and Ulli Roth's *Suchende Vernunft*, which he considered to represent diametrically-opposing views on the subject.<sup>10</sup> According to Dahm, Flasch sees faith and reason as parallel but separate entities in Cusanus,<sup>11</sup> whereas Roth maintains that to Cusanus they are identical.<sup>12</sup> Finding neither of these accounts satisfactory, Dahm then proposes an alternate view which attempts to mediate between the two "extremes".<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, in another essay from 2006, Klaus Kremer also takes exception to Flasch's and Roth's positions on this issue, however on the grounds that both represent essentially the same mistaken view.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whose side one takes in this debate, these examples confirm Dahm's initial statement, namely, that the issue of how to interpret faith and reason in Cusanus is still lively in the research, and far from being resolved.

But whence arises this controversy, and what is really under debate? In order to clarify the topic of the following study, a brief definition of its central terms is required. Faith (*fides*), in this context, refers in its substantive sense to the contents of Holy Scripture, and in its active sense to the act of credulity by which one assents to the truth of those contents. One of the paradigmatic medieval articulations of faith was that of Thomas Aquinas, according to whom it was "the act of the intellect assenting to a divine

---

<sup>10</sup> Flasch, K. *Nikolaus von Kues, Geschichte einer Entwicklung*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998; Roth, U. *Suchende Vernunft. Der Glaubensbegriff des Nicolaus Cusanus (BGPTM 55)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2000. Dahm writes of these two works, "Die von ihnen vertretenen Positionen erwecken, auf den ersten Blick betrachtet, den Eindruck weitgehender Übereinstimmung. In Wirklichkeit berühren sich hier jedoch zwei Extreme." Dahm (2006), p. 247.

<sup>11</sup> "Nach dem Verständnis von Flasch stehen Vernunft und Glaube bei Cusanus völlig unverbunden nebeneinander. Das vernünftige Denken beschreitet demnach seine eigenen Wege, gänzlich unabhängig vom Glauben." Dahm (2006), p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> Dahm writes that, for Roth, "bei Cusanus 'die Vernunft vom Glauben ungeschieden ist, eben nur seine Entfaltung darstellt'. Diese Position führt letztlich zu einer Identifizierung [...]" Dahm (2006), p. 249.

<sup>13</sup> "Weder die Reduzierung der Theologie auf reine Philosophie noch die Identifizierung des *intellectus* mit einem Glauben, den alle Vernunftreflexion immer schon ausfaltet, treffen den Kern des cusanischen Anliegens." Dahm (2006), pp. 272–273. Dahm's own view is that faith and reason in Cusan thought stand "in einem fruchtbaren polaren Spannungsverhältnis", which is moreover a necessary tension which researchers must resist the temptation to reduce in either direction. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>14</sup> Kremer, K. "Wege und Art der Gotteserkenntnis in den Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues" in *MFCG* 31. Trier: Paulinus, 2006, 53–102. On p. 80, Kremer writes that Roth relies on Flasch to back his own interpretation of the *fides-ratio* relation in Cusanus; and on p. 99 he writes, "Roths Auffassung läuft praktisch auf die von K. Flasch in seinen Büchern von 1998 und 2001 vertretene Position hinaus." Thus, to Kremer, both Roth and Flasch maintain that Cusanus' asserts the identity of faith and reason.

truth owing to the movement of the will, which is itself moved by the grace of God".<sup>15</sup> As we shall see in what follows, Cusanus' explication of faith will depart from the Thomistic definition in several fundamental ways, particularly regarding the role of the will and of grace.

We will be primarily concerned here with those contents of the Faith that defy human understanding—usually referred to as the “mysteries of faith” (*mysteria fidei*), which include the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Eucharist—as it is with these that the tension between faith and reason becomes most apparent.<sup>16</sup> Reason (*ratio*), when spoken of in contrast to faith in the context of Cusan thought, refers to the human capacity for knowledge and understanding which functions in accordance with certain rules—the most fundamental being the law of non-contradiction, as established by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV, where the Philosopher asserts that “it is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong to and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation”.<sup>17</sup> This law plays a key role in Cusanus' work, as it stands at the centre of his notion of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, or coincidence of opposites, whereby God, as infinite and absolute, is said to be beyond all opposition; the consequence being that the divine nature surpasses the limits of ordinary human understanding and is unknowable by reason.

Cusanus maintains the scholastic-Aristotelian view that human reason concerns only knowledge derived from data acquired through the senses. It is essentially due to these limitations that reason was considered incapable of grasping theological truths such as the Trinity, which entails the logical impossibility of the Godhead being simultaneously one and three, or the Eucharist, which involves the physical impossibility of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>18</sup> For this

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pope, Hugh. “Faith” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. Herberman, C. et al. eds. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909.

<sup>16</sup> The actual term *mysterium fidei* is most closely connected with the mystery of transubstantiation and occurred in the Roman Rite Canon of the Mass as part of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the Tridentine form of the Canon (instituted in 1570), the words appeared in the following phrase: « Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei, novi et aeterni testamenti: mysterium fidei: qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum ». On the sacrament of the Eucharist in relation to medieval theology, cf. e.g., Perczel, I., ed. *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy: Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*. Leuven: Leuven Univ. Pr., 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 3 (1005b 17–20). Cf. Treddinick, H., trans. Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Vol. 17. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> On the problematic nature of the Trinity in medieval theology see, e.g., Hoenen, M. “Virtus Sermonis and the Trinity. Marsilius of Inghen and the Semantics of Late-Fourteenth Century Theology” in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (Cambridge, 2001), 157–171.

reason, the usefulness of rational, scientific enquiry in the investigation of theological matters was long debated by theologians.<sup>19</sup> In essence, the debate over faith and reason in Cusan thought concerns how he handled the relation between these two disparate and seemingly conflicting types of knowledge.

However, in addition to this general sense of reason, or *ratio*, and its opposition to faith, Cusanus will develop a finer technical distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, whereby the former refers to the activity of human understanding and knowledge constrained by the law of non-contradiction, and the latter to its locus, faculty, and origin, which is *not* limited by this law. More specifically, “ratio” will pertain to all knowledge derived from perceptible things (and thus all of philosophy and science), and “intellectus” to the higher intellectual realm which is presupposed by rational science and as such is not positively attainable by it.<sup>20</sup>

This distinction has a long tradition, and Cusanus takes it from Augustine, who distinguished between *sensus*, *ratio*, and *intellectus* in Book XII of *De Trinitate*, where “sensus” refers to the sensory perceptions common to men and beasts, “ratio” to conceptual knowledge humans are able to form on the basis of sense perceptions, and “intellectus” to the “incorporeal and eternal reasons”, which are above the human mind, but only by means which is the human mind able to judge rationally regarding corporeal things, which are many and changeable. Augustine thus refers to “intellectus” and “ratio” as “higher” and “lower” reason, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> On the subject of reason and the Faith in medieval theology, see, e.g., Hoenen, M. “Theology and Metaphysics: The Debate between John Wyclif and John Kenningham on the Principles of Reading the Scriptures” in Brocchieri, M., ed. *John Wyclif: logica, politica, teologica*. Sismel: Edizione del Galluzzo, 2003, 23–55.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. I, ch. 2: « Oportet autem attingere sensum volentem potius supra verborum vim *intellectum* effere quam proprietatibus vocabulorum insistere, quae tantis intellectualibus mysteriis proprie adaptari non possunt. Exemplaribus etiam manuductionibus necesse est transcendenter uti, linquendo sensibilia, ut ad *intellectualitatem* simplicem expedite lector ascendat »; or *ibid.*, Bk. I, ch. 24: « [...] motum *rationis* [...] *intellectu* multo inferior est [...] » [my italics]. The distinction between the realms of *sensus*, *ratio*, and *intellectus* occurs in the sermons as early as Sermon 5 (h *Sermo* 5, 24–25); however, it only begins to be applied in what we may call its peculiarly *Cusan* sense as of *De docta ignorantia*, and thus is apparent in Sermons 22 and onward. It should also be pointed out that Cusanus sometimes uses “intellectus” in a non-technical way, which can lead to confusion. Cusanus often uses the words “intellectus” and “intelligere” to refer to the faculty or act of understanding in a general sense, i.e., one which might apply to reason as well (cf. e.g. *ibid.*, Bk I, ch.1: « [...] omnia Pythagoras per numerorum vim constitui et *intelligi* iudicabat »).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Augustine. *De Trinitate*, XII, 2: « Possunt autem et pecora et sentire per corporis sensus extrinsecus corporalia et ea memoriae fixa reminisci atque in eis appetere



Though it is thus hardly original, Cusanus will use this distinction with a greater degree of precision than Augustine, who never elaborated the precise nature of the working relationship between *ratio* and *intellectus*, and will bring it to an unprecedented level of prominence in his thought. Indeed, the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* which we first encounter in Cusanus' *De docta ignorantia* will become the philosophical lynchpin of his epistemological doctrine as of his solution to the *fides-ratio* problem—to such an extent that all his subsequent work may be regarded as the further articulation of the meaning and consequences of this constitutive relation. Accordingly, it will be the central thematic aim of this study to elaborate Cusanus' development of the *ratio-intellectus* dialectic.

So where does this tension between faith and reason actually present itself in Cusan thought? The first and most obvious example is the apparent contrast between the treatises and predicative works. Faith is certainly more often thematized in the sermons,<sup>22</sup> and the primacy of faith over knowledge acquired through human reason emphasized to an extent not seen in the treatises, as a number of commentators have rightly pointed out.<sup>23</sup>

---

conducibilia, fugere incommoda. Verum ea notare ac non solum naturaliter rapta sed etiam de industria memoriae commendata retinere et in obliuionem iamiamque labentia recordando [...] haec atque huiusmodi, quamuis in sensibilibus atque in eis quae inde animus per sensum corporis traxit agantur atque uersentur, non sunt tamen rationis expertia nec hominibus pecoribusque communia. Sed sublimioris rationis est iudicare de istis corporalibus secundum rationes incorporeales et sempiternas quae nisi supra mentem humanam essent, incommutabiles profecto non essent, atque his nisi subiungeretur aliquid nostrum, non secundum eas possemus de corporalibus iudicare. [...]» For more on the *ratio-intellectus* distinction in Augustine, cf. e.g. Turner, *D. Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> There are more than a dozen sermons which explicitly thematize the relation of faith and reason, including Sermons 4, 57, 60, 61, 124, 129, 130, 133, 134, 136, 143, 148, 176, 189, 193, 245, 256, 268, 275, and 289, and many more with brief or related discussions (see below, ch. 4). Of the treatises, only Book III of *De docta ignorantia* may be said to thematize the faith-reason relation, although important discussions are also found in *Idiota de sapientia* and *Idiota de mente* (see respective sections below).

<sup>23</sup> As has been pointed out by other commentators: Cf. Kremer (2006), p. 71: "In den Predigten begegnen mehrfach stark abwertende Äußerungen in bezug auf eine philosophische bzw. natürliche Gotteserkenntnis"; Hoenen, M. "Caput scholae rationis est Christus". Verschränkung von Exegese und Philosophie in den Predigten des Cusanus" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 43–69, pp. 44; 66: "Studiert man die Predigten des Cusanus [...], so fällt auf, wie stark die Spannung zwischen Glaube und Wissenschaft in ihnen hervortritt, stärker als in seinen anderen Werken. [...] Vergleicht man die Predigten mit den anderen Werken, lässt sich ein erheblicher Unterschied hinsichtlich der Methode feststellen. In den



For example, already in Sermon 1, Cusanus declares that with respect to knowledge of divine matters "[...] it is evident that the human intellect through its own vision not only is weak [...] but even remains altogether blind in and of its own nature."<sup>24</sup> In Sermon 4, the intellect is said by nature to "make war" on believing, since it resists giving assent to anything unproven, and as such is in a natural state of conflict with faith. Faith is a "power" which must wage war on the intellect and force it to assent to the unknown.<sup>25</sup> However it does so only for the greater benefit of the intellect, whose need for reasons is identified as a weakness, whereas faith, which requires no proof to believe, is "a power holding the intellect upright", and supporting it "against the impulses and concussions of contradictions and opinions, and against the severity of its own infirmity and sluggishness".<sup>26</sup> Cusanus furthermore adds, "God is seen without proof, by faith alone", and quotes Ambrose, "In matters of faith, we believe the pastors, not the dialecticians".<sup>27</sup> In Sermon 8, Cusanus says that contemplators should rely upon revealed faith, "for there are many things to which the weak and restricted reason cannot attain", which "must be believed only by faith as being things revealed from [God's] mouth".<sup>28</sup> In Sermon 189, it is emphasized that divine wisdom is hidden from the "knowledgeable" [*scientes*], and that man must become "foolish" [*stultus*] in order to attain it.<sup>29</sup> And in Sermon 268, Cusanus again maintains that faith must forcibly

---

meisten seiner anderen Werke beginnt Cusanus nicht mit dem Glauben, sondern reflektiert über Einsichten, die jedermann teilen kann, ob er nun glaubt oder nicht. [...] In den Predigten jedoch stellt sich der Zusammenhang von Glaube und menschlicher Einsicht eher umgekehrt dar. Hier betont Cusanus, dass die Philosophie in zentralen Punkten dem Irrtum verhaftet bleibt, wenn sie nicht durch den Glauben geleitet wird."

<sup>24</sup> h *Sermo* 1, 1 26–30: « [...] manifestum est humanum intellectum [...] non modo sua intrinseca visione debilere, verum penitus caecum ex sua natura remanere. » English translations of citations from Cusanus' early sermons [1–26] are taken from Hopkins, J., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430–1441*. Loveland, Colorado: Banning Press, 2003, with occasional adjustments.

<sup>25</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 5 1, 2–3; 10 1–2; 13 1, 2–3, 7–10: « Primo dictum est fidem esse virtutem. [...] quia credere improbabile virtutis est et vigoris. [...] Intellectus quaerit ob suam infirmitatem fulcrum et media probationum [...]. [...] Est ergo fides [...] virtus erigens [...] intellectum [...], supportans ipsum adversus impulsiones et concussiones contradictionum et opinionum et adversus propriae infirmitatis et ponderositatis vigorositatem. »

<sup>27</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 23 41–44: « [...] sic Deus [videtur] absque probatione, fide tantum. Unde Ambrosius: 'In hiis, quae fidei sunt, pastoribus creditur, non dialecticis'. »

<sup>28</sup> h *Sermo* 8, 9 36–40: « [...] non debet contemplans inniti sensui proprio, quin potius divinae revelatae fidei. Multa enim sunt, ad quae infirma et angusta ratio non potest pertinere, quae solum oportet per fidem tamquam ex ore revelata credere. »

<sup>29</sup> h *Sermo* 189, 19 31–37: « Parvulis igitur et simplicibus, qui aptiores sunt ad credendum quam scientes et huius mundi sapientes, revelantur ea quae regni Dei sunt et manent

“conquer” reason, and that the latter must “perish”, and man be made “as though unknowing and foolish” in the “captivity” of faith.<sup>30</sup> Passages such as these, in combination with the generally more homiletic and Scriptural focus of the sermons, create the impression that faith is set definitively over and against reason when it comes to knowledge of God.<sup>31</sup>

The treatises, on the other hand, in general take a very positive view of philosophical knowledge and rational, scientific enquiry in the search for theological knowledge. For example, in the prologue to *De docta ignorantia* (1441) Cusanus identifies learned ignorance as “a method of reasoning in divine matters” [*modus ratiocinandi in rebus divinis*]<sup>32</sup>; correspondingly, this method proceeds entirely by means of logical and natural-philosophical reasoning until Book III, where the object of investigation shifts to Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> Among other things, Cusanus provides in this work a strictly philosophical explication of the Trinitarian nature of God—traditionally considered to be a mystery of faith—the necessity of which he shows to be rationally demonstrable.<sup>34</sup>

---

abscondita sapientibus, ut ait Jesus. Unde ad hoc, ut revelatio capiatur, oportet, ut vir fiat parvulus et sapiens stultus [...] » (re. 1 Cor 1:18–25).

<sup>30</sup> h *Sermo* 268, 18 1–15: « Hic est attendendum quod fides illa, qua mortalis homo credit immortalitatem assequi posse, non acquiritur nisi <in agone> certaminis; nam in hac victoria, qua fides rationem vincit, est maxima lucta. Quando enim Abraham credidit id quod ratio impossibile iudicavit, vicit. Sic quando homo credit hoc, scilicet quod resurget ad vitam immortalem, cuius non habet nec rationem nec experientiam, et in oppositum eius ratio trahit, tunc necesse est quod moriatur ipsa ratio et cedat prudentia eius et humilietur superbia, praesumptio mentis et mortificetur, et fiat homo quasi insipiens et stultus et servilis de sua libertate, scilicet rationis, recedens se in captivitatem redigendo. »

<sup>31</sup> On Scriptural exegesis in Cusanus’ sermons, see Reinhardt, K. “Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Bibelexegese” in *MFCG* 27. Trier: Paulinus, 2001, 31–63.

<sup>32</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Others have also pointed out the strictly philosophical methodology employed in this treatise. Schönborn, for example, observes that although *De docta ignorantia* is a work of theology as well as philosophy, the authority of scripture plays hardly any role therein. Rather, based on the evidence of his “Grundintuition”, Nicolaus proceeds to explicate rationally the relationship between faith and knowledge, which is one of *complicatio* (Schönborn, C. “De docta ignorantia als christozentrischer Entwurf” in Jacobi, K., ed. *Nikolaus von Kues. Einführung in sein philosophisches Denken*. Freiburg, 1979, 138–156, p. 140).

<sup>34</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Book I, ch. 7, where Cusanus explicates the triune Origin in terms of *unitas-aequalitas-connexio*, arguing that this relation unfolds necessarily from the nature of absolute oneness. He concludes his argument with the following passage, showing clearly that he believes he has proven the necessary triune structure of the divinity: « Probatum est igitur: Quoniam unitas aeterna est, aequalitas aeterna, similiter et connexio aeterna. Sed plura aeterna esse non possunt. Si enim plura essent aeterna, tunc, quoniam omnem pluralitatem praecedat unitas, esset aliquid prius natura aeternitate; quod est impossibile. Praeterea, si plura essent aeterna, alterum alteri deesset ideoque nullum illorum perfectum esset; et ita esset aliquod aeternum, quod non esset aeternum, quia non

In the treatise *Idiota de sapientia* (1450), divine wisdom is said to be attainable through a process of reflection which begins with the appearance of sensible phenomena and reasons back to their necessary cause. Cusanus' maxim in this treatise is that "wisdom cries out in the streets".<sup>35</sup> Far from being inaccessible to human reason, because it is present in all things in creation, that wisdom may be discovered through rational enquiry into the nature of created things.<sup>36</sup> Cusanus hearkens back to this notion in his final treatise *De apice theoriae* (1464), in which the apex of theological contemplation is said to consist of reflection on God's nature as pure possibility (*posse ipsum*).<sup>37</sup> Faith plays no role in the understanding of God as *posse ipsum* as it is set forth in this text; rather this fact is said to be self-evident to anyone who takes the time to reflect upon it.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, although the topic of enquiry in nearly all of Cusanus' treatises is divine or theological knowledge, nevertheless the arguments and investigations used to attain it proceed without any apparent presupposition of faith. And even when faith is discussed in the treatises, it is done for the most part in a philosophical, as opposed to a dogmatic manner, and with surprisingly few references to Scripture. This has led many commentators to conclude that Cusanus was primarily a philosopher, or at any rate kept his roles as philosopher and theologian strictly compartmentalized. Leinkauf, for example, has remarked on what he calls philosophy's "high degree of speculative independence" in Cusanus, for which faith is, in his opinion, little more than a "non-sceptical relation to reality" which the mind must presuppose in order to function.<sup>39</sup>

---

esset perfectum. Quod cum non sit possibile, hinc plura aeterna esse non possunt. Sed quia unitas aeterna est, aequalitas aeterna est, similiter et connexio: hinc unitas, aequalitas et connexio sunt unum. Et haec est illa trina unitas, quam Pythagoras, omnium philosophorum primus, Italiae et Graeciae decus, docuit adorandam. »

<sup>35</sup> Re. *Proverbs* 1:20.

<sup>36</sup> h *Idiota de sapientia*, pp. 4–5: « Ego autem tibi dico, quod sapientia foris clamat in plateis, et est clamor eius, quoniam ipsa habitat in altissimis. »

<sup>37</sup> Here Cusanus reiterates his belief that divine truth is apparent in everything in creation and thus easy to find, referring back to *Idiota de sapientia*: « Magnae potentiae veritas est, in qua posse ipsum valde lucet. Clamitat enim in plateis, sicut in libello De idiota legisti. Valde certe se undique facilem repertu ostendit » (h *De apice theoriae* 5, p. 120).

<sup>38</sup> h *De apice theoriae* 6, pp. 120–121: « Nec est quisquam mentem habens adeo ignarus, qui non sciat sine magistro nihil esse quin possit esse, et quod sine posse nihil quicquam potest sive esse sive habere, facere aut pati. [...] Praesupponit enim omnis potens posse ipsum adeo necessarium, quod penitus nihil esse possit eo non praesupposito. Si aliquid certum esse potest, posse ipso nihil certius. »

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Leinkauf, T. *Nicolaus Cusanus. Eine Einführung*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006, p. 204.

These contrasting representations regarding the power of human reason to grasp theological matters seem to point to a conflict within Cusan thought, as it appears he applies a different and opposing set of principles in his treatises and sermons. However, as we shall see, this conflict is more apparent than real. First of all, the paucity of explicit discussion of faith in the treatises is no doubt partly due to the fact that it is the implicit presupposition of the philosophical discussions taking place, a fact which would have been clear to the theologically-trained reader of his time. Furthermore, although the treatises appear to rationally explicate aspects of the divine nature traditionally considered to exceed the power of human understanding, such as the Trinity, nevertheless, closer inspection reveals that here too faith is sometimes invoked, in a way moreover which hints that it has somehow tacitly been at play all along.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, while the general character of the sermons is as described above, closer inspection reveals that they too display a growing tendency to seek to explicate the Faith, and more importantly, to provide an account of the role of faith in the knowledge process which would tie the two together inextricably.

There is in fact a complex dialectic between faith and reason under development in both the treatises and predicative works of Cusanus—one from which emerges a single, consistent view. While its fullest and most nuanced expression is found only in the later sermons, there are signs of it already in the early predication, and also in Cusanus' most well-known early discussion of faith—namely, that which occurs in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, culminating in the chapter entitled *Mysteria fidei*. It is here that he establishes his basic orientation towards the faith-reason dialectic and sets the stage for all such subsequent discussions in the treatises and sermons. It is also here that he articulates the controversial view which will draw such intense criticism from his more conservative readers. For this reason, these early articulations must be briefly examined and clarified before we move on to study the reception and subsequent development of this doctrine.

---

<sup>40</sup> As in *De docta ignorantia*, when at the beginning of Book III, ch. 4, Cusanus declares: « Quoniam quidem ad hoc indubia nunc fide hiis talibus ratiocinationibus proveci sumus, ut in nullo haesitantes firmiter teneamus praemissa verissima esse [...] »—suggesting that he considers faith to have played some role in Books I and II, even though it was not mentioned in those books, whose arguments appeared to proceed according to purely rational principles (h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, ch. 4, p. 129).

*Mysteria fidei: Faith and Reason in Book III of De docta ignorantia*

The prologue to the third and final book of *De docta ignorantia* begins with the explanation,

Having said these few things about the universe, how it subsists in contraction, finally we will inquire, in learned ignorance and for the augmentation of our faith and perfection, into some things about the at once Absolute and contracted maximum, the ever-blessed Jesus Christ [...].<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, Cusanus does not hereupon enter into a dogmatic account of Christ based on Scripture, but rather seeks philosophically to explain how the *concept* of Jesus unfolds from an investigation into the nature of the universe.<sup>42</sup> And in this respect it is clear that Cusanus regards the arguments contained in Books I and II to lead to the conclusions of Book III, in that a properly-conducted *philosophical* investigation into the nature of God and the universe can *only* lead to Jesus Christ, and thus the strengthening of the Christian faith.

In Book I of *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus had introduced the concept of the “Absolute maximum” as a way of thinking about God. The Absolute maximum, he explained, is that in which all things coincide, and as such is also Absolute unity, or oneness. And, what’s more, the same may be said of the Absolute minimum. Indeed, there is something about the nature of any concept, that, when raised to the level of infinity, it becomes One in a transcendent sense—i.e., in the sense of exceeding all comparative relation. It is in this sense that God may be construed as that in which opposites “coincide”. God is Absolute maximum, not in the sense of being greater than his creation, but in the sense of infinitely transcending all *being-lesser* or *being-greater*. God’s unity is that from which plurality and comparative relation themselves spring. Since all conceptualizing, according to Cusanus, operates by means of comparative relation, Absolute unity is thus also the necessary precondition of our being able to conceptualize in the first place. For this same reason, however, God’s nature is

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, *Prologus*: « Paucis hiis de universo praemissis, quomodo in contractione subsistat, ad finem ut de maximo absoluto pariter et contracto, Iesu Christo semper benedicto, aliqua docte in ignorantia perquiramus in augmentum fidei et perfectionis nostrae [...]. » Citations from *De docta ignorantia* here use the English translation of Bond, L., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997, with occasional adjustments.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: « [...] breviter de Iesu conceptum pandemus [...]. »

incomprehensible, and may only be investigated “incomprehensibly”, i.e. through designations intended to point to His transcendence.<sup>43</sup>

Book II then went on to explicate the nature of the universe as “contracted maximum”, i.e., as the infinite unfolding of finite pluralities from Absolute unity. Whereas Absolute unity, as the principle of number, is logically prior to all plurality, Cusanus asks us to conceive of the contracted maximum as Unity “contracted”—which is to say expressed as a finite infinity, like an endlessly unfurling sequence of numbers.<sup>44</sup> In this way Cusanus articulates a fundamentally Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation, whereby creation is seen as the expression, or unfolding, into finite plurality of the infinite, enfolding oneness of God. Correspondingly, in Book II he makes increasing use of the motif *complicatio/explicatio*, or enfolding/unfolding, to distinguish the Absolute maximum from its contracted counterpart:

[...] the maximum is that to which nothing can be opposed, and where the minimum is the maximum. Therefore infinite unity is the enfolding [*complicatio*] of everything; indeed unity, which unites everything, speaks to this. Unity is not only maximal because it is the enfolding of number, but because [it enfolds] all things; and just as only unity is found in the unfolding [*explicante*] of unity through number, so is only the maximum found in all existing things.<sup>45</sup>

Cusanus then maintains that it follows from the reasoning in Books I and II regarding the Absolute and contracted maximum that we can also conceptualize a third sort of maximum, namely, one which is *both* Absolute

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Bk I, ch. I–III.

<sup>44</sup> This must be qualified: the “infinite plurality” of the universe, as contracted maximum, is only “privatively infinite”, according to Cusanus, in the sense that it is unbounded, yet can never attain the transcendent infinity that is characteristic of the Absolute, or God, alone. Cf. *ibid.*, Bk II, ch. I, pp. 64–65: « Quare, licet in respectu infinitae Dei potentiae, quae est interminabilis, universum posset esse maius: tamen resistente possibilitate essendi aut materia, quae in infinitum non est actu extendibilis, universum maius esse nequit; et ita interminatum, cum actu maius eo dabile non sit, ad quod terminetur; et sic privative infinitum. »

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Book II, ch. 3, p. 69: « Maximum autem est, cui nihil potest opponi, ubi et minimum est maximum. Unitas igitur infinita est omnium complicatio; hoc quidem dicit unitas, quae unit omnia. Non tantum ut unitas numeri complicatio est, est maxima, sed quia omnium; et sicut in numero explicante unitatem non reperitur nisi unitas, ita in omnibus, quae sunt, non nisi maximum reperitur. » The *complicatio/explicatio* motif is not of Cusan origin; he borrowed it from Thierry of Chartres’ commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate*, as has been pointed out many times before (cf. Klibansky’s notes on sources in the Heidelberg edition of *De docta ignorantia*, Book II, pp. 92–93; or Moffitt Watts [1982], p. 67).

and contracted. Such is the nature of Jesus Christ. It is therefore the project of Book III to explicate this concept, and through a series of hypothetical reflections on what the nature of such an Absolute and contracted maximum would be, to render the concept of Christ rationally plausible:

It has been sufficiently demonstrated that the universe is only contractedly a multitude of things, whose actual existence is such that no one thing attains to the simply maximum. I will add further that *if* an actually existing maximum contracted to a species could be given, *then*, in accord with the given species of contraction, this maximum would actually be all the things that in the power of that genus or species are able to be.

[...]

Thus it is clear that the contracted maximum cannot exist as purely contracted [...] since no such contracted thing could attain the fullness of perfection in the genus of its contraction. Nor would such a contracted thing be God who is most Absolute, but the contracted maximum that is God and creature, *would have to be* both Absolute and also contracted by a contraction that could exist in itself only by existing in absolute maximumness.<sup>46</sup> [my italics]

An Absolute and contracted maximum would furthermore be necessarily unknowable:

*If* a maximum power so united this contracted [maximum] to itself that it could not be more united and the nature [of each] preserved, and *were* this contracted [maximum] with its contracted nature preserved [...] by virtue of a hypostatic union both God and all things: this wonderful union would surpass all our understanding.<sup>47</sup> [my italics]

Because the Absolute and contracted maximum has this divine aspect, it exceeds the knowledge of man despite its human aspect. However, it

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, ch. 2, pp. 123–24: « Bene satis apertum est universum non nisi contracte esse plura, quae actu ita sunt, quod nullum pertingit ad simpliciter maximum. Amplius adiciam, si maximum contractum ad speciem actu subsistens dabile esset, quod tunc ipsum secundum datam contractionis speciem omnia actu esset, quae in potentia generis aut speciei illius esse possent. [...] Et hoc manifestum est ipsum maximum contractum non posse ut pure contractum subsistere [...], cum nullum tale plenitudinem perfectionis in genere contractionis attingere possit. Neque etiam ipsum tale ut contractum Deus, qui est absolutissimus, esset; sed necessario foret maximum contractum, hoc est Deus et creatura, absolutum et contractum, contractione, quae in se subsistere non posset nisi in absoluta maximitate subsistente. »

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 124: « Si maxima potentia ipsum contractum sibi taliter uniret, ut plus uniri non posset salvis naturis, ut sit ipsum tale servata natura contractionis [...] propter hypostaticam unionem Deus et omnia: haec admiranda unio omnem nostrum intellectum excelleret. »



is nonetheless necessary that the Absolute and contracted maximum be human in nature, since human nature stands at the pinnacle of creation, and as such “enfolds both intellectual and sensible nature and embraces all things within itself” as a “microcosm” of the created world, as indeed the ancients described it.<sup>48</sup> And because God is the equality of his creation, he is contracted in human nature, which is in turn contractedly everything in creation. Thus *if* there were an Absolute and contracted maximum, it would necessarily be both human and God. In this way, already by the end of chapter three, Cusanus has come up with an entirely philosophical justification for Christ’s nature.

It is only in chapter 4 of Book III that Cusanus overtly connects this philosophical explication of the “concept” of the Absolute and contracted maximum with the Jesus Christ proclaimed in Scripture and foretold by the prophets:

Our deliberations have now led us, in unwavering faith, to the point that without hesitation we firmly hold that the reasonings [*ratiocinationes*] we have set forth are most true. Furthermore we maintain that the fullness of time has passed and that Jesus, the ever blessed, is the first-born of all creation. Because of what Jesus, existing as a human, divinely worked beyond the power of a human being, and because of other things that he found to be true in all things, affirmed about himself, and to these affirmations his companions bore witness in their own blood, we are justified in asserting with an invariable constancy, long upheld by countless infallible proofs, that he is the one whose coming at some future time all creation awaited from the beginning and whose appearance in the world he had himself foretold by the prophets.<sup>49</sup>

The above paragraph contains the pivotal move of Book III, and merits close inspection. At this point in the argument, Cusanus asserts that he is justified in concluding that this Absolute and contracted maximum is without doubt Jesus Christ. Notably, he does not say that this move is

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, ch. 3, pp. 126–127: « Humana vero natura est illa, quae [...] intellectualem et sensibilem naturam complicans ac universa intra se constringens, ut microcosmos aut parvus mundus a veteribus rationabiliter vocitetur. »

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., ch. 4, pp. 129–130: « Quoniam quidem ad hoc indubia nunc fide hiis talibus ratiocinationibus proveci sumus, ut in nullo haesitantes firmiter teneamus praemissa verissima esse, subiungentes dicimus temporis plenitudinem praeteritam ac lesum semper benedictum primogenitum omnis creaturae esse. Nam ex hiis, quae ipse existens homo supra hominem divine operatus est, ac aliis, quae ipse in omnibus verax repertus de seipso affirmavit, testimonium in sanguine suo perhibentes, qui cum ipso conversati sunt, constantia invariabili infinitis dudum infallibilibus probata argumentis iuste asserimus ipsum esse, quem omnis creatura in tempore futurum ab initio expectavit, et qui per prophetas se in mundo appariturum praedixerat. »



justified by the above philosophical reflections, but rather attributes the fairness of this conclusion to the evidence of the miracles worked by Jesus, as witnessed by the apostles, which testify to the fact that he indeed is this Absolute and contracted maximum. Cusanus presents this conclusion as though it flowed self-evidently from his preceding considerations, but in fact a shift has taken place, from philosophical reasoning apparently independent of any assumptions regarding faith, to a conclusion based (it seems) entirely on belief in the testimony of Scripture.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the function of the carefully-formulated philosophical arguments of chapters 1 through 3 is rendered unclear, if this conclusion is anyhow ultimately to be made on the strength of Scriptural evidence alone. This relation is furthermore complicated by Cusanus' assertion that the foregoing philosophical deliberations were nonetheless conducted "in unwavering faith", and that as a result, what was asserted only hypothetically is now affirmed as "most true".

Clearly, faith and reason are complexly intertwined in this account which at the outset presents a highly abstract "conceptual" explication of Christ before suddenly switching to a dogmatic account, invoking the testimonies of apostles and saints.<sup>51</sup> In addition, having made his conclusion that this Absolute and contracted maximum must both be affirmed to exist and to be none other than Jesus Christ, Cusanus then immediately switches back to philosophical explanation, continuing with his previous reflections on its nature:

In order that, above all our intellectual comprehension, as it were, in learned ignorance, we may conceive of this person who united man to himself, let us by ascent of our intellect consider [...]<sup>52</sup>

It is evident that Cusanus intends that the considerations which follow, as they are made "above" the intellect and in learned ignorance, also proceed out of "unwavering faith". However, like the reflections prior to chapter 4, they take the form of a series of rational arguments designed to

---

<sup>50</sup> Roth also recognizes the presence of a sudden shift, or "Sprung" at this point in the text: "Insofern muß gerade das Verhältnis von *De docta ignorantia* III 1–3 zu *De docta ignorantia* III 4–10 interessant werden, hat man doch hier immer einen Sprung von einer rein denkerischen hypothetischen Deduktion der Christologie im Sinne einer Hinführung zum Glaubensgeheimnis der Menschwerdung zur Annahme desselben im Glauben gesehen." Roth (2000), p. 45.

<sup>51</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, ch. 4, p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.: « Et ad hoc, ut supra omnem intellectualem nostram comprehensionem quasi in docta ignorantia hanc personam concipiamus, quae hominem sibi univit, ascendentes in nostro intellectu consideremus [...]. »

corroborate the testimony of Scripture. For example, he explains why it is philosophically necessary that the Son of God be born of a virgin, and why it is necessary that his mortal body die by crucifixion.<sup>53</sup> These accounts are obviously intended to defend the rational plausibility of the contents of Scripture.

That this is related to the concern of being able to defend the faith against the infidel is clear from chapter 8, where it is explained why Muslims and Jews can only maintain their respective faiths through a rational error, “for they assert the impossible” according to Cusanus.<sup>54</sup> He further maintains that, on the basis of the foregoing philosophical discussion, “it ought to appear clearer than light to anyone having understanding that no human being can be in all respects most perfect and maximum, supernaturally born of a virgin, unless that human were also God.”<sup>55</sup> Cusanus thus feels not only that the Christian faith is entirely compatible with reason and that reason supports the truth of the contents of Scripture, but furthermore that reason is somehow bound to faith in a deeper way, since correct reasoning *must* lead to faith, on his account, just as faulty reason will lead away from it. While he thus refrains from using reason overtly to prove the Faith, nevertheless the connection he makes between them exceeds mere compatibility.<sup>56</sup>

This deep link between faith and reason is further intimated in chapter 10, where the deprivation of truth is identified as the ultimate human torment. According to Cusanus, not even the fires of hell are comparable to the torment of “those fiery intellectual sufferings from which Jesus Christ [...] deigns to save us”.<sup>57</sup> Thereby it is indicated that faith, as embodied by Christ, is the *intellectual* life of man, that our salvation is pre-eminently an intellectual salvation, and Jesus a pre-eminently intellectual saviour.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, ch. 5 and 7, respectively.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, ch. 8, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 144: « Verum luce clarius intellectum habenti apparere potest [...] [quod] nec hominem posse esse per omnia perfectissimum atque maximum, supra naturam ex virgine natum, qui simul Deus non sit. »

<sup>56</sup> Thus authors who have denied that Cusanus attempts to prove the faith are only partially correct (Cf. e.g., Kremer [2006], pp. 62–64; 81). On the one hand it is undeniable that Cusanus presents numerous demonstrations of the rational necessity of God and of the Trinity in his works. On the other hand he also maintains that faith is yet required, in addition to these rational demonstrations, although not because the demonstrations themselves are faulty.

<sup>57</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, ch. 10, p. 151: « Ita et poenis infernalibus, quae aut igni elementalī sulphureo ac pice et ceteris cruciatibus sensibilibus assimilantur, nullam comparationem habent ad igniles illas intellectuales aerumpnas, a quibus nos Iesus Christus, vita et salvatio nostra, praeservare dignetur [...] »

Immediately following these statements, chapter 11, entitled *Mysteria fidei*, opens with the assertion that faith is the beginning of all understanding:

Our predecessors all agree that faith is the beginning of understanding. Indeed all disciplines presuppose certain things as first principles, which are grasped by faith alone and from which is obtained an understanding of the things to be treated. For <everyone willing to rise to learning must believe those things without which no ascent is possible. As Isaiah says: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" [Isaiah 7:9].<sup>58</sup>

It is apparent that an attempt is being made here to bridge two different senses of "faith"; i.e., an abstract notion which would apply to all sciences, on the one hand, and a dogmatic sense of faith as belief in the truth of Scripture, on the other. This becomes clearer as Cusanus continues:

Faith therefore enfolds in itself everything understandable. However the understanding is the unfolding of faith. The understanding therefore is directed by faith, and faith is extended by the understanding. Therefore where there is no sound faith, nothing is truly understood. It is obvious to what kind of conclusion erroneous principles and a weak foundation lead. But there is no faith more perfect than truth itself, which is Jesus.<sup>59</sup>

Cusanus connects the philosophical notion that all sciences are only as strong as the foundational principles which they necessarily presuppose to the dogmatic notion of faith as Jesus Christ. The acknowledgment that a kind of faith is involved in all knowledge is taken as indication that Christ, who is the truest faith, is thus the surest foundation for *scientia*, or knowledge as such. Cusanus supports this through references to the Gospel of John, concluding with his statement that "These things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God".<sup>60</sup>

However, the *soundest* faith, Cusanus adds, is that which is "extended and unfolded in accordance with the given teaching of ignorance". Hence,

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Bk. III, ch. 11, pp. 151–152: « Maiores nostri omnes concordanter asserunt fidem initium esse intellectus. In omni enim facultate quaedam praesupponuntur ut principia prima, quae sola fide apprehenduntur, ex quibus intelligentia tractandorum elicitur. Omnem enim ascendere volentem ad doctrinam credere necesse est hiis, sine quibus ascendere nequit. Ait enim Isaia: «Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis». »

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 152: « Fides igitur est in se complicans omne intelligibile. Intellectus autem est fidei explicatio. Dirigitur igitur intellectus per fidem, et fides per intellectum extenditur. Ubi igitur non est sana fides, nullus est verus intellectus. Error principiorum et fundamenti debilitas qualem conclusionem subinferant, manifestum est. Nulla autem perfectior fides quam ipsamet veritas, quae lesus est. »

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

although Scripture was written to report the Faith to man, nevertheless, to Cusanus, reading Scripture is not the best way to receive this faith. Rather must we aspire to the kind of faith which the apostles themselves experienced, which is through the *experience* of learned ignorance:

Since [God] is not knowable in this world, where reason, opinion, and teaching lead us by means of symbols from the better known to the unknown, God is grasped only where persuadings leave off and faith enters in; through which we are rapt in simplicity, so that above all reason and understanding, in the third heaven of simplest intellectuality [...], we may incomprehensibly contemplate [Christ]. [...] And this is that learned ignorance through which the most blessed Paul, ascending, saw himself to be ignorant of Christ, whom at one time he had merely known, as he was being lifted higher towards him.<sup>61</sup>

Here Cusanus for the first time explicitly links the doctrine of learned ignorance with faith, indicating that it is moreover the very state experienced by Paul, when he was in the “third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). While above reason and understanding, this state is nonetheless eminently intellectual; indeed, that which is entered through faith is the realm of the intellect.<sup>62</sup>

The remainder of chapter 11 is given over to a mystical description of the experience of approaching this intellectual truth through faith, whereby all the senses are left behind, and one views “the mountain that is Christ” only with the “intellectual eye”, and the more so in accordance with the degree of one’s faith. In this way one may come directly and personally to “see” Christ—which is to Cusanus the purest and most genuine experience of faith. In this state of “simple intellectuality” we experience Truth itself, which is the end of all understanding, in that it is the principle and source of the truth all things which the understanding finds through reason to be true.<sup>63</sup> It is, to Cusanus, a vision of Christ as Word, or *logos*, of the universe. And for this reason even the greatest faith is not a negation of reason, since it is always faith in the truth presupposed by all rational science.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 152–153: « Qui cum in hoc mundo non sit cognoscibilis, ubi ratione ac opinione aut doctrina ducimur in symbolis per notiora ad incognitum, ibi tantum apprehenditur, ubi cessant persuasiones et accedit fides; per quam [...] supra omnem rationem et intelligentiam in tertio caelo simplicissimae intellectualitytis [...] contemblemur incomprehensibiliter [...]. Et haec est illa docta ignorantia, per quam ipse beatissimus Paulus ascendens vidit se Christum, quem aliquando solum scivit, tunc ignorare, quando ad ipsum altius elevabatur. »

<sup>62</sup> The identification of the “third heaven” with the intellect was first made by Augustine, in *De Genesi ad litteram*, XII.

<sup>63</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, ch. 11, pp. 153–154.

A closer look at *De docta ignorantia* therefore reveals that faith actually plays a large role in this, his definitive treatise; and although it remains on the margins of the discussion, rather as the *terminus ad quem* of philosophical investigation, yet it forms the principle as well as the end of the investigation.<sup>64</sup> While the first two books of *De docta ignorantia* are highly philosophical in their approach to theology, it becomes evident in Book III that in fact an attempt is being made in this treatise to fuse faith to an intellectual principle in such a way that faith and reason do not stand in a relation of opposition. However, this notion—brought forth only in the penultimate chapter of the treatise—is not extensively discussed and remains somewhat enigmatic.

Cusanus attempts in *De docta ignorantia* to show how faith and reason are necessarily conjoined in the concept of the Word, or *logos*, of God, who is above all an intellectual God. However, while this move relieves the tension between faith and reason in one respect, it intensifies it in others. On the one hand, even while faith is identified as the faith of Scripture, nevertheless the authority of Scripture seems to take a back seat to inner and direct experience of faith, which, it appears, can be attained through a process of pure reflection—thus leaving some question as to the role and importance of Scripture in Cusan theology. On the other hand, there

---

<sup>64</sup> Christoph Schönborn emphasized learned ignorance as a process that leads to Christ, repeatedly stressing that he is 'the goal' of learned ignorance, and that the *fides Christi* is the completion or fulfillment of reason's search for truth: "Daß dabei dieses 'progredere—voranschreiten' in der DI mit der Person Jesu zu seinem Ziel gelangt ist, scheint für Nikolaus von Kues festzustehen. Der Weg der DI könne, so meint er, das 'desiderium—Verlangen' des Menschen letztlich nur zu Christus führen [...]; das aber bedeute, durch den Geist umgewandelt zu werden 'in Jesum . . . qui est finis intellectualium desideriorum—der das Ziel allen geistigen Verlangens ist'" (Schönborn, C. "De docta ignorantia als christozentrischer Entwurf" in Jacobi, K., ed. *Nikolaus von Kues. Einführung in sein philosophisches Denken*. Freiburg, 1979, 138–156, p. 140). Schönborn correctly maintains that Scripture plays little role in *De docta ignorantia* precisely because Christ is the goal of the process of learned ignorance which it is the purpose of the treatise to describe. This underscores a characteristic of Cusanus' approach to faith in the treatises: namely that it functions more as the underlying principle of his rational investigation than as its explicit object. On the other hand, as Ulrich Offermann rightly pointed out, to focus on faith, or Christ, as the goal of learned ignorance somewhat obscures the point that faith is the condition of possibility of knowledge, and therefore always also its starting point (Offermann, U. *Christus—Wahrheit des Denkens. Eine Untersuchung zur Schrift «De docta ignorantia» des Nikolaus von Kues (BGPTM 33)*. München: Aschendorff, 1991, pp. 174–182, p. 20). Faith cannot simply be something at which one arrives, nor a result of self-reflection, since it is already at work in the process of learned ignorance whether or not one is aware of it. This therefore does not relieve the tension between the abstract and dogmatic aspects of faith in Cusanus, since the latter, which refers to the actual contents of Scripture, must also somehow belong to the starting point of Cusanus' reflection.

is clearly a tension between the philosophical argumentation with which Cusanus argues for the plausibility of the Faith and the ultimate acceptance of the latter on the basis of the authority of revealed Truth. How can reason support the plausibility of the Faith if it has no actual probative power with respect to the articles of faith? What is the basis of such plausibility, if a leap of faith is still required to reach the conclusion that an absolute and contracted maximum does in fact exist *and* can only be Jesus Christ?

Ultimately, two kinds of faith emerge from *De docta ignorantia*: what we may call an *epistemological faith*, which is common to all the sciences, and is essentially the understanding's presupposition of the existence and attainability of true knowledge—a kind of “faith” in truth itself. It is not difficult to see how the existence and necessary form of this type of faith might be demonstrated through rational reflection on the conditions of possibility of knowledge. And then there is a *dogmatic faith* which believes, on the authority of Scripture, that this truth is none other than Jesus Christ, a truth which can only be grasped through an act of unknowing assent.<sup>65</sup> Cusanus clearly wishes to join these two types of faith in an inseparable fashion—not only to show that the former can be used to demonstrate the plausibility of the latter, but furthermore that a properly conducted philosophical investigation into the nature of the “epistemological” faith presupposed by all science can *only* lead to the “dogmatic” faith of the Catholic religion. However the precise nature of the relation between these two types of faith is unresolved in this treatise. For further clarification one must look elsewhere in his *opera*, as it indeed receives fuller treatment in other treatises, and, perhaps most of all, in his sermons.

### *Faith and Reason in the Early Sermons*

Although the sermons emphasize the dogmatic type of faith far more than the treatises, nevertheless a tension between faith and reason also

---

<sup>65</sup> Other commentators have made a similar distinction: Walter Euler identifies two distinct but complementary dimensions of Cusanus' notion of faith: one which he calls “der Seinsglaube”, which is “das Vertrauen der Vernunft auf die Ordnung alles Seienden von einem Prinzip her [...]”, and refers essentially to what we have referred to as the ‘epistemological’ dimension of faith whereby the mind, in order to function at all, must assume the existence of an intelligible universe. The other, which he calls “der Offenbarungsglaube”, refers to the dogmatic dimension of faith, and is the openness or willingness to receive the revealed Word of Scripture (Euler, W. *Unitas und Pax. Religionsvergleich bei Raimundus Lullus und Nikolaus von Kues*. Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1990, p. 197).

emerges here, as closer analysis shows that Cusanus tries to fuse Christian dogma with a philosophical notion of faith as the condition of possibility of knowledge. In general, the sermons prior to 1440 (i.e., those preceding *De docta ignorantia*) lack this element and focus on the authority of the Gospel, saints, and Church Fathers, on the one hand, and the weakness of reason on the other.<sup>66</sup> However, even in some of the earliest sermons, there are signs of Cusanus' desire to integrate faith and reason in a way that goes beyond traditional *fides quaerens intellectum*; i.e., beyond the Anselmian notion of confident faith seeking to strengthen itself through rational enquiry into its contents.<sup>67</sup>

In Sermon 4, for example, which we saw very strongly asserts the authority of faith, there are nonetheless indications that a more complex view is in development. *Fides autem Catholica* (1431) was Cusanus' first sermon dedicated entirely to the theme of faith and, like all the early sermons, was heavily dependent upon other authors.<sup>68</sup> However, supplemental "notes", containing sketches of additional arguments pertaining to the relation of faith and reason and even the possibility of proving the

---

<sup>66</sup> Siegfried Dangelmayr also noticed a shift in the way Cusanus speaks of the faith-reason relation beginning with *De docta ignorantia*, maintaining that Nicolaus developed from a "Glaubensverständnis" in the early sermons that perceived a rift between faith and reason, to a "dialectical" conception of their relation in which the intellect comes to realize that truth is the constitutive ground of its being: "Der intellectus ist nur, insoweit die Wahrheit in ihm gegenwärtig ist, ihm als ständig sich entziehende seinen Erkenntnisbereich eröffnet." (Dangelmayr, 1968, p. 439). According to the later understanding, one sees that this truth, as Absolute Maximum, can be nothing other than Christ—the "intellectus maximus", whom the finite intellect cannot directly apprehend but necessarily assumes in every process of reasoning. Faith in Christ is therefore the very "Grundakt" of the intellect and the "ursprüngliche Anfang des Erkennens" (ibid. p. 451). Thus in his "Reifzeit", according to Dangelmayr, Cusanus held that there is no difference between philosophical reasoning and theological dogma: "Was die christliche Tradition als dogmatische Wahrheit enthält, das ist für das Verständnis des Cusanus [...] identisch dasselbe mit dem philosophischen Schluß auf die absolute Geistigkeit Gottes" (ibid. pp. 439–440). Dangelmayr's account may be essentially confirmed, though I would hesitate to identify anything in the scant eighteen sermon-sketches prior to *De docta ignorantia*—which were almost entirely derivative of other sources and contain little that can be identified as Cusanus' own—as representing anything as firm as a position. Rather I would say that, apart from certain hints, what Cusanus writes about faith and reason in the early sermons pre-dates the development of his position, which after *De docta ignorantia* remained the same in its fundamentals.

<sup>67</sup> See esp. the prologue to Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* for his discussion of this notion. For more information on Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum* cf. Davies, B. and Leftow, B. *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 65–68 ("Faith in Search of Understanding").

<sup>68</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 5 1–3. In this sermon especially Hugh of Strasbourg's *Compendium theologicæ veritatis*, William of Paris' (i.e., William of Auvergne's) *De fides et legibus*, and Gratian's *Decretals*.



truth of the Catholic faith, suggest a certain dissatisfaction with his initial compiled account and a desire to go further in explicating the Faith than had traditional authorities.<sup>69</sup>

These notes show the young Cusanus struggling to work out a model of faith that reconciles Catholic dogma with a notion of universal reason that even non-believers would find persuasive. Here he argues that man has a natural disposition, or *habitus*, for faith, in order that he may acquire a *habitus* for understanding, in accordance with Isaiah 7:9. With this notion (which he derives from Lull),<sup>70</sup> we see the beginnings of his later epistemological notion of faith, whereby the latter becomes part of the structure of knowledge. Faith is a disposition to believe that the intellect can attain true knowledge of God, and is as such a *habitus* for truth:

Faith is a disposition [*habitus*] by which a Catholic believes that there is clarity in divine matters, so that it prepares a light for the intellect, in order that the intellect may understand clearly, and not confusedly, acts of divine reasoning [...]. Faith [...] is superior to understanding, because it believes more greatly than [the understanding] understands. [...] Faith has the enlightenment of truth [...].<sup>71</sup>

By virtue of this disposition, Cusanus argues, the Catholic faith has a greater explanatory power than ordinary understanding, since it believes in things which it exceeds the power of the understanding (without faith) to understand. Because the intellect is thus “illuminated” by faith, believers have a greater capacity for knowledge than unbelievers. Faith is therefore superior to the intellect in the way that truth is superior to understanding: i.e., not in an oppositive, but in a facilitative sense.

However, it is only beginning with the sermons following the writing of *De docta ignorantia* in 1440 that the tendency to rationalize faith becomes strongly apparent. The first in which Cusanus really begins to integrate his speculative thought into his predication is Sermon 22. Written just

---

<sup>69</sup> h *Sermo* 4, p. 67: «Notae, in primis de fide et ratione, de argumentis ad probandum fidem Trinitatis in creaturis relucens [...]», etc.

<sup>70</sup> With reference to Lull's statement that faith is a God-given *habitus* for grasping what it is beyond the intellect to comprehend (cf. *Liber de praedicatione* 3rd part of 2nd part of Distinction I [De novem Virtutibus, deductis per principia], section 5., Raimundi Lulli Opera Latina, Stegmüller, F. ed. Palma of Majorca, 1961, p. 243). h *Sermo* 4, 26.

<sup>71</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 27 1–4, 17–18, 20: «Fides est habitus, cum quo catholicus credit distinctionem in divinis, ut praeparet lumen intellectui, ut intellectus intellegat clare et non confuse actus divinarum rationum [...]. Altior [...] fides est quam intellegere, quia plus credit quam intellegat. [...] Fides habet illustrationem veritatis [...].»



shortly after the completion of *De docta ignorantia*,<sup>72</sup> it is the first sermon in which God is asserted as being beyond the *coincidentia oppositorum*; and, indeed, much of the sermon's content consists of versions of arguments used in this treatise. Concomitantly, as we saw in Book III of *De docta ignorantia* a decisive, if incomplete, attempt to reconcile the Faith with the dictates of reason, we see here a shift from the more conflictual portrayal of the *fides-ratio* relation in the earlier sermons to a view which regards reason as playing a central role in spiritual development.

Cusanus begins by asserting that God "surpasses all the senses and all power of reason" and is "apprehended by faith".<sup>73</sup> However, he adds, "all nations" and "even the heathen" maintain that God is the best and that from which all things derive, since to conclude otherwise would be contrary to reason.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, he reasons, since God is Truth, he cannot be understood *not* to exist, since whether his existence were affirmed or denied, the truth of either assertion would affirm his existence, *qua* truth. Consequently, God is thereby seen necessarily to exist "beyond all opposition and contradictoriness".<sup>75</sup> And because he is beyond all opposites, he is also beyond all names and *rationes*, which are bound by the law of non-contradiction.<sup>76</sup> Now, while this is on the one hand an argument for negative theology, it is apparent that for Cusanus negation is now just one rung on a ladder to a higher understanding of the divine. He accordingly goes on to explain how one may elevate the intellect to recognition of God's necessary triunity by means of the understanding that God is beyond opposites:

[...] reason apprehends nothing apart from multitude and magnitude. [...] And because multitude has oneness as its beginning, necessarily multitude is one thing. Now magnitude does not exist apart from a trinity. ([...] for there is no physical object apart from length, width, and depth [...]) Hence reason finds of necessity that the first beginning of all things must be one and trine uncomposedly and altogether simply, so that it is the beginning,

---

<sup>72</sup> Sermon 22 is dated December 25, 1440; *De docta ignorantia* was completed in February 1440.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. h *Sermo* 22, 7 3–4: « [...] Deus non attingitur ratione nec imaginatione nec sensu—exsuperat enim omnem sensum et rationem—et fide attingitur. »

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 4–9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 3–9. Similarly Cusanus asserts a little later, with respect to understanding the Trinity: « Et non respicias ad quid nominis [...]. Nomina enim per comparisonem et rationem imponuntur [...]. Et non est possibile nobis hominibus aliquo signo, figura aut locutione attingere Trininitatem » (*ibid.*, 16 10–16).

the metre and the measure of all things. [...] These things show us, in a vestige which we ought to detect above all oppositeness, how it is that infinite oneness exists in a Trinity, and vice versa.<sup>77</sup>

Even though reason is confined to the realm of opposites, nevertheless it can “detect above all oppositeness” certain necessary features of its own nature and origin, which appear as traces, or *vestigia* in sensible phenomena. Recognition of the limits of reason is thus no bar to rational investigation of the divine. On the contrary, it is just the beginning of a higher intellectual reflection, which is learned ignorance.<sup>78</sup> By means of this “very subtle understanding” which transcends the coincidence of opposites, the nature of the ineffable Trinity may begin to be grasped.<sup>79</sup>

In Sermon 22, Cusanus also discusses at length the notion of Christ being the divine concept, or *ratio*, a notion which he introduced in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, whereby the human mind receives its intellectual nature as an image of that divine concept:

For a word is a likeness of the intellect, in which the intellect enfolds the intelligible. Hence [...] in the divine the Son is the Father's mental Word, namely, is the divine wisdom, divine art, or divine *ratio*. [...] Hence, in the beginning was the *ratio*, and it was with God [...]; and it was God, because it was the eternal art and Infinite concept. [...] Therefore, all things were created through this infinite *ratio*. [...] in him all things are the art, which is life, whose image all living natures bear. And [...] the life is the light of all men, because the life is the *ratio* and wisdom from which derive every concept and all wisdom<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 19 6–7, 10–20, 25–28: « [...] nihil enim extra multitudinem et magnitudinem ratioprehendit. [...] Et quia magnitudo sine trinitate non est, ut videmus in contracta magnitudine ad molem corpoream,—quoniam non est corpus nisi longum, latum, et profundum [...], hinc necessario invenit ratio, quod primum principium omnium debet esse unum et trinum incomposite, sed simplicissime, ut sit omnium principium, metrum et mensura. [...] Quae nobis ostendunt ut in vestigio, quod supra omnem oppositionem sentire debemus, quo modo infinita Unitas in Trinitate est, et e converso. »

<sup>78</sup> Thus it is important to recognize that although learned ignorance entails the recognition that God's nature can only be grasped beyond the coincidence of opposites, and therefore beyond the realm of reason, this recognition is itself attained through a process of reasoning; hence Cusanus continues to argue rationally regarding, e.g., God's wisdom, or the nature of the Trinity, even having asserted their essential ineffability.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 14 1–2. Further on in the sermon, Cusanus also writes: « Si [...] vis in Christo Dei filius renasci, accedere te et venire oportet ad hunc solem, tu, qui es gentilis in subtilitate rationum humanarum » (ibid., 42 1–4). While it is intellect, not reason, which eventually grasps the divine Word, nevertheless it is reason which discovers the intellect; and thus reason is essential to the process of learned ignorance.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 23 11–15, 27–32; 30 6–11: « Verbum enim est similitudo ipsius intellectus, in quo intellectus complicat intelligibile. Unde [...] Filius in divinis sit hoc verbum mentale Patris, sit scilicet sapientia, ars aut ratio divina. [...] Unde in principio fuit ratio, et fuit apud

As the divine Concept, “Christ has shined upon us in order to make us partakers of His Wisdom”.<sup>81</sup>

At the beginning of Sermon 23, Cusanus states his intention to explain “how we enter into very lofty intellectual light by means of the sensibly-received light of the teaching of Christ, who is Truth”.<sup>82</sup> “Accordingly”, he continues, this process will move, first, “from the sensible to the imaginable”, then “from the sensible to the rational”, and finally, “from the sensible to the intellectual”.<sup>83</sup> Not the ineffability, but the *intelligibility* of the Faith is now emphasized, since “Christ’s holiness is intelligible in and of itself”.<sup>84</sup> A large portion of this sermon is given over to explication of how to proceed through these three stages. In this process, Cusanus emphasizes—in a way prescient of the “idiota” wisdom proclaimed in the eponymous 1450 treatises—that book-learning is not necessary, since the first wise men—among whom he names Pythagoras, Socrates, and Christ—themselves wrote nothing. “Rather”, he writes, “if we need to ascend from the perceptual to the intelligible [...], then let us turn to the one Book written by the Finger of God”.<sup>85</sup>

This “Book” does not refer to Scripture, but to creation; thus Cusanus goes on to exemplify this learning process through reference to natural phenomena. By reflecting on the nature of the things comprising the cosmos, Cusanus explains, one will naturally come to understand the concepts of multiplicity, inequality, and discreteness. Moreover, no one, he insists, is so simple that he would not see these things clearly.<sup>86</sup> Reflecting on these concepts, one will further intuit that they presuppose the concepts of oneness, equality, and union:

---

Deum [...]; et fuit Deus, quia aeterna ars et infinita ratio. [...] Per hanc igitur infinitam rationem omnia creata sunt. [...] et [...] omnia in ipso sunt ipsa ars, quae est vita, cuius omnes vitales naturae imaginem gerunt; et [...] vita est lux hominum, quia ipsa vita est ratio et sapientia, a qua omnis ratio et sapientia [...]. »

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 39 15–17: « Ita Christus illuxit nobis, ut nos suae sapientiae faceret participem. »

<sup>82</sup> h *Sermo* 23, 2 10–12: « Quo modo ad intellectuale altissimum lumen intramus ex lumine doctrinae Christi, qui est veritas, sensibiliter recepto? »

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 2 13–16: « Prima igitur ambulatio est de sensibili ad imaginabile, secunda est de sensibili ad rationale, tertia est perfectissima nobis, scilicet de sensibili ad intellectuale. »

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 5 19: « Sancititas autem Christi pe se est intellegibilis [...]. »

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 15 3–6: « [...] sed, si necessarium habemus de sensibili ascendere ad intellegibile [...] ad librum unum Dei digito scriptum nos convertamus! » Compare to this *Idiota de sapientia*, Book I, 4.

<sup>86</sup> h *Sermo* 23, 15 24–25: « [...] et nemo est ita simplex, quin ista videat aperte. »

And so you see that the First Beginning is Oneness, Equality, and Union, without which there could be no beginning of that which is originated as multiple, unequal, and discrete. And since multiplicity falls short of oneness, Oneness is as the Father of many nations. And Equality can rightly be called the Son of Oneness, for Equality arises only from Oneness. And Union is called the Holy Spirit.<sup>87</sup>

Thus the Trinity is again shown to be rationally explicable.

In Sermon 24, Cusanus moves even further in this direction with his exegesis of the Lord's prayer. In particular, we see a reappearance of his attempt in *De docta ignorantia* to combine dogmatic and epistemological notions of faith. Here he writes:

Now, our understanding is disposed to know the truth; and hence, that which you should believe, you find in truth, [namely] in God and in creatures. And if you find faith in truth—through which you are enlightened regarding to what perfection a human being can come—then likewise you hope to come to it. [...] And therefore [it happens] that our intellect, which is disposed towards truth, finds in the Lord's prayer the illumination for knowing, with steadfast faith, what truth is.<sup>88</sup>

Belief in the revealed Faith, as embodied in the Lord's prayer, is belief in one's own faculty of understanding. Concomitantly, our faculty of understanding finds in the Faith its own operational parameters, and thereby the means of attaining its end. God is similarly said to reside "in the heaven of the highest intellect", where he can be found "by the eyes of intellectual natures".<sup>89</sup> Although we cannot see Him with our sensory eyes, He can be seen by means of the "intellectual faith", which is "God's greatest gift" to us.<sup>90</sup> Here Cusanus explicitly refers to a *fides intellectualis*, which he moreover claims is the same as the Faith of the *pater noster* prayer. There-

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 17 7–16: « Et ita vides, quod primum principium est unitas, aequalitas et conexio, sine quibus principiat multiplicitas, inaequalis et divisi principium esse non posset. Et quoniam ex unitate cadit multitudo, est unitas ut Pater multarum gentium. Et aequalitas recte dici potest Filius unitatis; non enim oritur aequalitas nisi ex unitate. Et conexio Spiritus Sanctus dicitur. »

<sup>88</sup> In *Sermo* 24, 3 1–13: « Nam nunc intellectus noster ad veritatem sciendam inclinatus est ideoque, quae credas, in veritate, [scil.] in Deo et creaturis invenis; et si veritatis fidem inveneris eaque, quo esse humanum ad perfectionem suam pervenire possit, illuminaris, tunc etiam eo te venturum esse speras [...]. Est igitur, quod intellectus noster ad veritatem inclinatus in Pater noster illuminationem invenit ad sciendum firma fide, quid sit veritas. »

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 10. Similarly he writes: « Sed conceptibilis et comperibilis in caelis intellectualis naturae est » (ibid., 10); and: « [...] etiam intellectus ab effluxu Filii Dei non ad aliud nisi ad veritatem inclinatur » (ibid., 21 18–19).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 31 13–14, 19–21: « [...] eum sensibilibus oculis videre non possumus, sed oculis fidei. [...]. [...] fide intelligentiae solum videtur. Hoc est supremum donum Dei [...]. »

fore, in praying the Lord's prayer, Cusanus writes, "our sensual nature is elevated to the spirituality of our understanding".<sup>91</sup>

It is evident that the highly philosophical account of faith which appears in *De docta ignorantia* grew out of a conviction, also present in the early sermons, that the *mysteria fidei*, although inexplicable and occupying a higher realm than human reason, nevertheless are in no way opposed to reason. Thus in Sermon 4, Cusanus maintained that "no one, if he is of sound reason, has the excuse to offer (on grounds of his incapability) that he cannot with a general sense of credulity believe to be true all that is contained in the sacred writings", for the accounts contained in Scripture are eminently plausible to reason—so much so that anyone reasoning properly would not hesitate to assent to them.<sup>92</sup>

However, a tension between this attempt to rationalize the Faith on the one hand, yet stress the need for a leap of faith on the other, also comes out in the early sermons. A good case in point is Cusanus' repeated insistence on the usefulness of rational argumentation for trying to convince Jews of the Trinity. Already in Sermon 1, Cusanus maintained that he had once, through reason, been able to persuade learned Jews of the necessary triune structure of God. But when it came to the Incarnation, he said, no amount of reasoning or appeals to biblical prophecy would persuade them, because they had become "hardened" against this teaching.<sup>93</sup> In Sermon 2, Cusanus likewise attributed the Jews' refusal of the Faith to their misunderstanding of the nature of the Trinity, which they think asserts the existence of three Gods. "If only they understood", he wrote, "[they would believe] as we do!"<sup>94</sup> Clearly there is a tension here between Cusanus' insistence in Sermon 2 that only understanding is required and his admission in Sermon 1 that even some of those who do understand still refuse the Faith.

Similarly, in a well-known passage from Sermon 19, *Verbum caro factum est*, Cusanus cited Augustine's assertion that the Platonists affirmed

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 43 23–25: « Et ideo nostra sensualitas in hac oratione in spiritualitatem nostrae intellegentiae exaltata est [...] »

<sup>92</sup> h *Sermo* 4, 20 3–7: « Nullus etiam ob incapacitatem se excusare habet, si ratione viget, quin in generali credulitate credere possit hoc totum esse verum, quod in sacris eloquiis continetur [...] »

<sup>93</sup> h *Sermo* 1, 7 27–31: « Ego etiam aliquando disputando deprehendi sapientes Iudaeos ad credendum Trinitatem inducibiles. Sed quod Filius in divinis sit incarnatus, hoc est, in quo sunt indurati nec rationes nec prophetias audire volunt. »

<sup>94</sup> h *Sermo* 2, 8 16–18: « Si intellegerent, uti nos credimus! Quia putant nos tres deos credere, nostram fidem culpant. »

a great deal of what is in the Gospel, even intimating something of the triune structure of the divinity; but because they lacked the Faith, they knew nothing of the Incarnation.<sup>95</sup> For this reason, Cusanus adds, it is not difficult for the faithful to find rational grounds to support their belief in the Trinity; but one starting out “from merely naturalistic considerations and without their having had faith” would not arrive at these reasons.<sup>96</sup>

We recognize in these passages the same argument brought forth in chapter 8 of Book III of *De docta ignorantia*. Here, as there, it is recognized that a leap of faith is still required to turn an infidel into a Christian. Nevertheless, Cusanus’ repeated emphasis on the rationality of the Trinity (as on its prefigurations in antiquity)<sup>97</sup> manifests his desire to demonstrate a connection between faith and reason that goes beyond the traditional compatibilist model. This desire also explains Cusanus’ insistence on the centrality of reason in conversion.<sup>98</sup>

From these initial observations, we may conclude that a tension between faith and reason permeates all of Cusanus’ early works; and that the outward contrast between his predication and treatises may be attributed more to a difference of emphasis than of position: Unsurprisingly, Cusanus focused more on faith while preaching, and employed a more scientific approach in his speculative works. These variations in emphasis highlight the uneasy relationship between philosophy and theology in Cusan thought. Much of Cusanus’ account of faith in *Mysteria fidei* and in sermons like 22 is rational to the point that it hardly seems like faith at

<sup>95</sup> h *Sermo* 19, 6 1–12; re. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* X, 29 and *Confessiones* VIII, 2, 3.

<sup>96</sup> h *Sermo* 19, 6 13–21: «Hodie tamen habentes per fidem Trinitatem esse, non esset post fidem rationes Trinitatis difficile invenire [...], ad quas tamen ex puris naturalibus, nisi fidem habuissent, non pervenissent [...]». »

<sup>97</sup> Cf. h *Sermo* 2, 4 for an earlier discussion of prefigurations of the Trinity in ancient philosophy.

<sup>98</sup> These passages foreshadow his later, much more extensive attempts to show how non-believers could be brought to the Faith through reason, in treatises such as *De Deo abscondito*, and especially *De pace fidei*. Euler has also pointed out Cusanus’ consciousness of the value of abstract philosophical argumentation for convincing infidels of the reasonableness of the Christian faith, which was the main task of *De pace fidei* (on which Euler’s work concentrates)—referring in this connection to Sermon 19. Far from asserting that reason can *prove* the truth of the Trinity, Cusanus here makes the claim only that reasons *can* be found « post fidem » for that which has already been accepted on faith. However in his works aimed at non-believers, according to Euler, Cusanus broadens this view to include any who are willing to entertain, at least as a ‘hypothetical postulate’, the possibility of truths such as the Trinity. So long as such an ‘openness’ is present in the hearer, then “zahllose Argumente” can be produced in support of its plausibility and reasonableness, as well as against putative logical attacks. Euler (1990), pp. 200–201.

all, and furthermore appears to leave little or no place for the authority of Scripture or for grace. At the same time, there is no doubt that Cusanus recognized the need for pure credulity, as evinced by the jarring transition, in Book III, ch. 4 of *De docta ignorantia*, from philosophical argumentation for the rational necessity of the Incarnation, to the sudden assertion that its truth can be grasped only through a leap of faith.

The following study will explore Cusanus' repeated attempts, throughout his works and throughout his life, to demonstrate the essential harmony of faith and reason. The crux of his position will always be that truth amounts to faith in Truth itself, and therefore that a properly-conducted process of reasoning in which *ratio* turns towards the source of its rationality will lead to the Faith, as the substantive contents of Truth. His position, ultimately, is not that reason leads to faith, nor that faith leads to reason, but rather that (epistemological) faith leads to (Christian) Faith, just as an image of truth leads to its Exemplar. In this way he hoped to settle late-medieval *fides-ratio* disputes, not by reducing one to the other, nor by holding the two in some sort of "fruitful tension", but rather by showing that they are merely differing expressions of the same thing. We will see that, while his basic position did not change over the years, his articulation of it grew in complexity and sophistication, culminating, in the late sermons, in a *fides-ratio* doctrine of considerable elegance and originality.

#### PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH AND REASON IN CUSAN THOUGHT

The tension between faith and reason in the Cusan oeuvre has been oft remarked upon, and the proper characterization of Cusanus—whether he should be considered a philosophical theologian or a theological philosopher—oft debated. The answers have varied greatly and have tended to reflect the proclivities of the researcher in question. Jaspers and Cassirer, to take two prominent examples, have come under strong criticism in recent years for their overly-secularizing and modernizing portrayals of Cusanus. Jaspers, who wrote that the greatness of Cusanus was to be found solely in his metaphysics, claimed that faith was merely a "Christian cloak" in which these metaphysical ideas were draped.<sup>99</sup> Cassirer, concerned

---

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Jaspers, Karl. *Nikolaus Cusanus*. München: Piper, 1964, p. 262.



to show Cusanus' importance for the Renaissance and Modern periods, tended to exaggerate the degree to which his theories of knowledge anticipated modern subjective epistemology.<sup>100</sup> Less starkly, nevertheless Flasch—one of the major contemporary Cusanus scholars—also seems to play down the role of Christian faith in Cusan thought, when he writes that “he was a ‘theologian’ in the sense that Plotinus, Cicero, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, Fichte and Hegel were ‘theologians’”.<sup>101</sup> Such writers have tended to treat the Christian context of Cusanus' work as though it were a mere historical accident in relation to his philosophy, and not an integral feature.

On the other hand, a more recent trend in Cusanus scholarship has sought to restore faith and theology to a position of prominence in Cusanus' work, recognizing that they are essentially interconnected elements of Cusan thought.<sup>102</sup> Beierwaltes, for example, stresses the interdependence of faith and reason in Cusan epistemology.<sup>103</sup> However, not everyone has been convinced that the elements of faith and reason may be so happily conjoined, and the alternating emphasis on *fides* and *ratio* in Cusanus' work has been perceived by some as the unsettling presence of two irreconcilable opposites, a conflict of interests which undermines the intellectual integrity of Cusanus' entire speculative enterprise. In this regard, Cusanus has been accused of failing “to deal with or successfully to evade the consequences of nominalism”.<sup>104</sup> He is construed by such

---

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Cassirer, Ernst. *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner Verlag, 1927. As example of contemporary criticism of the portrayal of Cusanus as a proto-modern philosopher who elaborated a subjective method prescient of Cartesian reflexion, Cf. Benz, Hubert. “Nikolaus von Kues: Wegbereiter neuzeitlicher Denkweise oder kritischer Interpret traditioneller philosophisch-theologischer Konzeptionen?” in *Herbst des Mittelalters? Fragen zur Bewertung des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*. Jan Aertsen and Martin Pickavé, eds. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004, pp. 371–392.

<sup>101</sup> “Er war ‘Theologe’ in dem Sinne, in dem Plotin und Cicero, Descartes, Spinoza und Leibniz, Fichte und Hegel ‘Theologen’ waren”. Cf. Flasch, *Nicolaus Cusanus*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2001, p. 140.

<sup>102</sup> A trend which has corresponded, unsurprisingly, with the increasing availability of Cusanus' body of sermons, which began to be edited and published by the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften in 1970.

<sup>103</sup> “Daß Cusanus in diesen seinen Erwägungen zu den ›*Mysteria fidei*‹ den Glauben als Anfang des Weges und als bewegendes Medium seines Fortgangs, die Einsicht nicht als die Aufhebung, sondern als die Selbstvollendung des Glaubens denkt, darf gerade von Philosophen nicht verdeckt oder verdrängt werden”. Cf. Beierwaltes, Werner. “Das Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie bei Nicolaus Cusanus”. *MFCG* 28. Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 2003, pp. 65–102, p. 81.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Robert M. Wallace, trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983, p. 526.



writers as an essentially conservative thinker handicapped by a scholastic heritage of which he was never able to break free, despite some preemptive gestures in the direction of Modernity.

Cusanus' attempt to resolve the tension between faith and reason by fusing the dogmatic and epistemological notions of faith marks the uniqueness of his contribution; but it is indeed the most problematic aspect of his thought, as it tends in two equally difficult directions. Commentary on this issue has correspondingly been polarized, with authors seeing in Cusanus either a total absorption of philosophy into theology or the subsumption of the theological within the philosophical. Some (as we saw above), have rejected these polarities, seeking a middle ground which maintains the integrity of both realms. Still others have identified the radically intellectual nature of Cusanus' interpretation of faith without remarking that this creates any tension at all.

Exemplary of the latter tendency is Wolfgang Lentzen-Deis' book-length study, *Den Glauben Christi Teilen*, an examination of Cusan predication and proclamation of the faith.<sup>105</sup> To Cusanus, he writes, it is the natural desire (*desiderium naturale*) of the human mind to try to bridge the epistemological gap between the uncontracted One and the contracted many. Book III of *De docta ignorantia* offers the means for closing this gap, with its description of Jesus Christ as the absolute and contracted maximum, who is therefore the goal of all intellectual striving (*finis intellectualium desideriorum*).<sup>106</sup> The fulfilment of this desire is, according to Lentzen-Deis, the ultimate goal of Cusanus' intellectual project. He highlights Cusanus' identification of Christ, in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, as both the *goal* and the *contents* of faith,<sup>107</sup> a fact whose consequence it is that the greatest possible degree of faith, which every pilgrim must strive to attain, is at the same time the *least* possible degree of faith—insofar as Christ, as the complete contents of faith, is truth itself and therefore certainty.<sup>108</sup> Lentzen-Deis has here identified an important point of *fides-ratio* tension in Cusan thought, namely, the difficulty of reconciling a

---

<sup>105</sup> Lentzen-Deis, W. *Den Glauben Christi Teilen. Theologie und Verkündigung bei Nikolaus von Kues*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1991.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 68–69.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 71–72.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 72 re. *De docta ignorantia*, Book III, Ch. 11: «[...] ut fides apud ipsum ad tantum certitudinis indubitabilis gradum elevata sit, ut etiam minime sit fides [...]».

model of faith as degrees of certainty with any genuine sense of credulity. However, he does not pursue the matter further.

This tension appears again in Lentzen-Deis' discussion of the relation of faith to Christiformity in Cusanus: Because the goal of the faithful is complete unification with the contents of faith, faith is therefore a process of deification, through which the believer takes part in the divinity of Christ. This process is moreover necessarily intellectual, for « *Fides [...] non reperitur nisi in intellectu* ». <sup>109</sup> Thus he draws the conclusion, "For Nicolaus Cusanus, it's not merely the case that 'the truth can only be reached through faith', but also that 'Faith is the revealed truth'". <sup>110</sup> Once again, the author has raised an important issue; for this notion of faith as a process through which the intellect becomes increasingly assimilated to truth is as problematic as it is problem-solving. However Lentzen-Deis gives no indication that he perceives any tension in Cusanus' account of the relation between faith and reason.

Ulrich Offermann, on the other hand, in his work, *Christus—Wahrheit des Denkens*, <sup>111</sup> recognizes that the identification of reason with the Christian faith has far-reaching implications, at least for the status of all reasoning not grounded therein—which can only be considered inadequate. He points out that, to Cusanus, all reasoning seeks the truth—even that ungrounded in the Christian faith. Thus while knowledge sought outside of it can never be sufficient with respect to truth, it nevertheless seeks, albeit misguidedly, the same goal. Because Jesus Christ is the truth, he is the inevitable conclusion of all properly-conducted rational inquiries. Thus Cusanus believed that Christianity could provide answers to all of the questions of the Muslim and Jewish faiths, as well as to those of the ancient philosophers. <sup>112</sup> To this characterization I would add that, to Cusanus, since all reasoning seeks the truth, and the truth is Christ, therefore all reasoning seeks Christ *whether it knows it or not*, and thus in its very seeking already expresses, necessarily, a degree of faith.

---

<sup>109</sup> Quoted passage from h *Sermo* 32. "Die Teilhabe am 'Glauben Christi' setzt eine Bewegung auf Christus hin und eine schrittweise zunehmende Einung mit ihm voraus, die zu einer 'intellektuellen' Christuserfahrung führt." Lentzen-Deis (1991), pp. 77–78.

<sup>110</sup> "Für NvK gilt nicht nur: 'Die Wahrheit kann also nicht anders als durch Glauben erreicht werden', sondern sogar: 'Der Glaube ist die geoffenbarte Wahrheit [...]'. Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>111</sup> Offermann, U. *Christus—Wahrheit des Denkens. Eine Untersuchung zur Schrift « De docta ignorantia » des Nikolaus von Kues (BGPTM 33)*. München : Aschendorff, 1991. Cf. pp. 174–182.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

Offermann provides a brief but excellent discussion of the nature of the relation between faith and reason in the latter part of his book, in connection with Cusanus' own discussion in *Mysteria fidei*, which Offermann identifies as the key to *De docta ignorantia*. He begins with Cusanus' assertion that faith is both the beginning and the end of all reasoning, highlighting Cusanus' identification of Christ with truth itself.<sup>113</sup> Jesus is the first principle, on which alone all knowledge of truth is based, and faith in him is therefore faith in truth itself. Just as every science operates only by virtue of principles which it assumes to be true, reason as such cannot provide its own foundation, but must assume as its basic principle, truth. Not only Christ's nature, but reason itself, is something incapable of being rationally determined, and therefore faith belongs constitutively to the latter. Offermann correctly points out that this fact applies not only to theological knowledge, but is a general epistemological principle which must, according to the Cusan scheme, extend to every field of knowledge.<sup>114</sup>

To Offermann, due to the *complicatio-explicatio* nature of the faith-reason relation, no meta-reflection on this relation is possible; rather is reflection on this relation itself part of reason's self-realization, or explication.<sup>115</sup> Thus it becomes clear that not only are faith and reason in no way opposites, but neither can they be viewed as occupying separate realms; there can be no question of knowing some things on faith, and others through reason.<sup>116</sup> The nature of this relation moreover entails that the success of any process of reasoning is fundamentally bound to faith. More specifically, reasoning will attain to truth in proportion to the strength of its faith, or conversely, fall into error in proportion to the weakness of the same.<sup>117</sup>

Offermann's account leans towards a highly philosophical interpretation of Cusanus (as Kremer notes with dismay),<sup>118</sup> which regards faith as entirely subsumed within the structure of knowledge. However, while Offermann is correct to assert that there is a kind of faith in Cusanus (what

---

<sup>113</sup> "Für Christen ist diese Wahrheit personal und trägt einen Namen: Jesus Christus." Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>115</sup> "Die Reflexion über das Verhältnis von Glaube und Vernunft kann nur durch die Vernunft geleistet werden, die sich in diesem Verhältnis realisiert und vollzieht." Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>116</sup> "Eine Grenzziehung zwischen dem der Vernunft zugänglichen Erkenntnisbereich einerseits und dem dem Glauben zugeordneten Erkenntnisbereich andererseits ist für ihn nicht möglich." Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>117</sup> "Die Kraft unserer Seele kann nur insoweit zur Vollendung der Vernunft gelangen, als sie glaubt." Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>118</sup> Kremer (2006), p. 80.

we have identified as 'epistemological' faith) which is inseparable from the operation of reason, nevertheless this does not represent Cusanus' complete view on the matter; and by not taking into account Cusanus' invocation of dogmatic faith in Book III, chapter 4 of *De docta ignorantia*, Offermann misses the crux of the tension between faith and reason in this work: namely, that there is not one, but *two* kinds of faith at work in *De docta ignorantia*, which moreover by virtue of their very nature cannot be reduced to the other.

Thomas Leinkauf similarly recognized the potential for a strictly philosophical interpretation of faith in his recent study of Cusanus, whereby he stresses the usefulness of Cusanus' philosophy outside its Christian context.<sup>119</sup> While acknowledging the importance of faith in Cusan philosophy—to which end he quotes the passage in Chapter 11 of *De docta ignorantia* which describes faith as the enfolding (*complicatio*) of reason, and reason in turn as the explication (*explicatio*) of faith<sup>120</sup>—Leinkauf stresses the *explicatio* side of this equation, which he says is capable of a "high degree of speculative independence".<sup>121</sup> Again, such an epistemological interpretation is not incorrect, but fails to take into account that the whole purpose of Cusanus' development of a philosophical notion of faith was to show that reason necessarily supported *the Faith*. Cusanus certainly did not intend to develop, nor would he countenance, a notion of faith that could be detached from its Christian context.

Ulli Roth's work, *Suchende Vernunft* is devoted exclusively to the subject of faith in Cusan philosophy and theology.<sup>122</sup> *De docta ignorantia*,

<sup>119</sup> Leinkauf, T. *Nicolaus Cusanus. Eine Einführung*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006, p. 204: "Die Philosophie des Cusanus ist sicherlich christlich fundiert, aber sie ist deswegen nicht schon nur für Menschen christlichen Glaubens produktiv rezipierbar."

<sup>120</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk III, ch. 11, p. 152, 3–4: « Fides igitur est in se complicans omne intelligibile. Intellectus autem est fidei explicatio. »

<sup>121</sup> "Zwar faltet der Glaube (fides) [...] 'alles Intelligible ein' [...] und der Intellekt (die Vernunft) ist, umgekehrt, eine 'Entfaltung des Glaubens' [...], dabei ist allerdings Glaube auch in einem weiteren Sinne zu verstehen als dasjenige alle rationalen Akte fundierende nicht-nihilistische, nicht-skeptizistische Grundverhältnis zur Wirklichkeit, das jedes Denken einnehmen muß, dem es darum geht, eine unverfügbare Realität nicht nur scharfsinnig und auf die Wurzeln hin zu reflektieren, sondern in dieser auch aktiv zu leben. Zugleich weist die Philosophie des Cusanus einen hohen Grad spekulativer Selbstständigkeit auf, ist immer sorgfältig darauf bedacht, auf der Höhe der philosophischen Durchdringung der sehr komplexen Themenbereich zu bleiben. Sie will die für sie so wichtige Grundlage des Glaubens rational vermitteln: so kann man das soeben zitierte Verhältnis *fides-intellectus* vor dem Hintergrund des Einfaltungs-Theorems [...] als ein philosophisch faßbares Verhältnis begreifen lernen". Leinkauf (2006), p. 204.

<sup>122</sup> Roth, U. *Suchende Vernunft. Der Glaubensbegriff des Nicolaus Cusanus* (BGPTM 55). Münster: Aschendorff, 2000, p. 1. Roth emphasizes that if, to Cusanus, faith is the "*initium*

with its focus on Christ, lays the groundwork, according to Roth, for the Cusan conception of faith.<sup>123</sup> Because everything finite is subject to a 'more' or 'less', understanding can progress only as a *comparativa inquisitio*. However, without Jesus as *maximum contractum individuale*, even the starting point for a *comparativa inquisitio* is missing.<sup>124</sup> Therefore all thinking proceeds only through faith in Christ, even if it does not initially realize it. All progress of reason is thus at once a conversion or a turning to Christ in faith.<sup>125</sup>

Faith is, according to Roth, the "self-confidence of reason" [*das Selbstertrauen der Vernunft*].<sup>126</sup> Especially in the sermons, Cusanus defines faith as the unification of human nature with God, viz. the reality of the Incarnation.<sup>127</sup> Thus faith is defined as the ability to reach that which it desires. This is not a pure possibility of thinking [*Denkmöglichkeit*], but the certainty of reaching its goal, namely, truth.<sup>128</sup> That which is believed is not just *credibile*, but is that by virtue of which truth even appears as a possibility to thought. Faith is thus the condition of possibility [*Erreichen-Können*] of thought, and is to be thought of in connection with hope, in the medieval Christian sense. Therefore reason need only reflect on its own ground to reach its goal, since faith is already presupposed by this process.<sup>129</sup> Only the thought of the possibility of reaching this goal is a gift of God by grace. As Roth puts it, Cusanus speaks of faith as a gift of God, but always puts it in the hands of men.<sup>130</sup> Thus he also points out that to Cusanus the possibility of faith as a gift of God is always already given, as in *De pace fidei*, where Christian knowledge is portrayed as innate in all men. But it still remains to be accepted—and in this connection he again asserts that all reflection is a conversion.<sup>131</sup>

---

*intellectus*"—as it is called in *De docta ignorantia* (III, I)—then his concept of faith holds the key to understanding his thought as a whole. He nevertheless observes that Cusanus himself rarely thematized faith in his theoretical works, for which explicit discussion one must turn instead to the sermons. The bulk of Roth's study is in fact devoted to a detailed examination of faith in *De docta*, supplemented by two shorter studies of *De pace fide* and *De visione Dei*, some assorted other works, and concluding with a section on the sermons.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. Similarly, he later writes that, since the true 'self' is none other than Jesus, all self-reflection of reason is a turning to Christ (ibid., p. 306).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 308.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

Whereas Offermann interpreted the equation of faith with truth in Cusan thought to mean that faith is entirely subject to a philosophical principle, Roth takes the opposite tack, interpreting it to mean that philosophy and knowledge are subsumed within theology. This interpretation is in fact truer to Cusanus' intention, who always maintained the primacy of faith in the faith-reason relation (often with appeal to Isaiah 7:9), regardless of his highly intellectual interpretation of it. Roth correctly points out that the Faith is more than just *credibile*, or plausible, to Cusanus, and his formulation of faith as the "self-confidence of reason" underscores the essential epistemological function of faith—not only in theology, but with respect to all knowledge—as the condition of possibility of understanding. However Roth's account does not discuss the problems that arise when one tries to incorporate dogmatic faith or a sense of faith as unknowing assent into the "Erreichen-Können" of thought, in which faith is present in any act of reflection and thus "conversion" has already taken place. Even if reason reflecting on its own grounds leads necessarily to the notion of an absolute and contracted maximum, how does it lead to Jesus Christ or the contents of Scripture? Nor does he point out the theologically problematic nature of a model of grace as 'a gift always already given'. Thus, while it more accurately represents Cusanus' intentions than Offermann or Leinkauf, it stops short of acknowledging the tensions arising from a model of faith as the "self-confidence of reason".

In this respect, Walter Euler deserves credit for acknowledging that there is both a dogmatic and an epistemological dimension to Cusanus' conception of faith, and that they stand in a "certain tension" to one another.<sup>132</sup> However, he views this not as problematic, but simply as part of the "dialectical complementarity" proper to negative and affirmative theology.<sup>133</sup> This places him alongside Dahm and Kremer as readers who acknowledge the existence of a tension between faith and reason in Cusanus, but regard it as unproblematic, or even "fruitful". Albert Dahm first reflected upon the role of faith in Cusan thought as part of a broader study concerning Cusanus' soteriology as manifested in his early predication.<sup>134</sup> Citing Cusanus' identification in Sermon 33 (1444) of the *tertium caelum* (re: Cor. 12:2) with the *caelum intellectuale*, Dahm explains how faith is that which raises one above the flesh and into the 'third heaven' where only is it

---

<sup>132</sup> Euler (1990), p. 197.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>134</sup> Dahm, A. *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues. Ihre Entwicklung von seinen frühen Predigten bis zum Jahr 1445* (BGPTM 48). Münster: Aschendorff, 1997.

capable of a vision of Christ.<sup>135</sup> Because this third heaven is the realm of the intellect, it is clear that faith is associated with a process of the highest intellectual order.<sup>136</sup> Dahm nevertheless tries to retrieve a genuine notion of grace in Cusanus by emphasizing the latter's remarks that faith is also a kind of 'rapture' (*raptus*) and thus associated with passivity and receptivity, in stark contrast to the active striving of a 'self-mastering' intellect which has not yet freed itself from sin.<sup>137</sup>

The problem with this account is that Cusanus is only critical of the striving intellect insofar as it remains limited to knowledge attained through the senses (which would thus fall short of the third heaven of the intellect). And as he makes clear that the essential nature of the intellect *is* faith, the humble receptivity of faith is in fact nothing other than the intellect's openness to its own inner nature and origin. As such, the contrast Dahm wishes to portray here does not really exist. Dahm also highlights man's dependence upon grace for the *visio intellectualis*, and the givenness of faith as a 'gift of God'; however, since this gift is an inherent structure of the intellect, such appeals are unhelpful. Dahm himself admits that grace is a subject that finds little explicit discussion in Cusanus; what he does not admit is that it is rarely discussed because it plays no active role in Cusan epistemology.<sup>138</sup>

In his 2006 essay, Dahm again emphasizes the soteriological angle as the key to understanding the faith-reason relation in Cusanus, maintaining that, although man is by nature inclined to seek God, due to his fallen nature his intellect is weak and incapable of reaching Him of its own

---

<sup>135</sup> "Im Glauben wird der Mensch 'extra carnem' herausgehoben, im Glauben öffnet er sich für sein eigentliches Ziel." Dahm, 1997, pp. 181–82.

<sup>136</sup> "Bezugsobjekt des Glaubens und Ort seines Wirkens ist der Intellekt. 'Fides enim non reperitur nisi in intellectu.'" Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>137</sup> "Der Glaube lässt sich demnach definieren als reine und demütige Empfangsbereitschaft, die zur selbstherrlich-überheblichen Haltung des Vertrauens auf die eigenen Kräfte in stärkstem Kontrast steht." Ibid. Haubst also emphasized this passive aspect of learned ignorance over active, intellectual striving, supporting it primarily with references to the sermons (Haubst (1956), p. 50).

<sup>138</sup> Dahm (1997), p. 183. Dahm ties his observations to passages in Book III of *De docta*, where he finds the groundwork for the above schema already laid: "Diese grundsätzliche Orientierung nimmt er im Rahmen seiner Erwägungen zu den 'Mysterien des Glaubens' wieder auf. Unser Geist erreicht sein Ziel nur 'per conversionem intellectus, cui sensus oboediant, et ipsum per fidem maximam'. Die Umkehr des *intellectus*, grundsätzlicher formuliert, der *ascensus intellectus* gelingt nur im Glauben. Damit haben wir die cusanische Position schon sehr präzise umschrieben" (ibid., p. 180). Dahm thus identifies both sides of this tension—that 'fides non reperitur nisi in intellectu' and nevertheless that the *mysteria fidei* can only be reached through a *conversio intellectus* in faith; however without remarking that there is anything problematic about this relationship.



power, and is therefore entirely dependent upon grace.<sup>139</sup> The relation between faith and reason can thus only be properly understood, he writes, from a salvational perspective.<sup>140</sup> As a certain dialectical tension, or “fruitful polarity”, is inherent to such a relation, Dahm writes, one must resist “reductionistic” interpretations like those of Flasch and Roth, who in his view seek either to separate faith and reason entirely, or subsume one completely within the other, either of which results in an inappropriate “unidimensionality”.<sup>141</sup>

Dahm’s interpretation, however, does not take into account Cusanus’ clear assertion that the act of grace whereby man was saved from his fallen nature was the Incarnation itself, whereby human nature was united to the divine.<sup>142</sup> And he overlooks the fact that the turning in faith through which the intellect is strengthened and led to its goal is a turning *of* the intellect towards its own intellectual origin in the Word. This does not necessarily entail a “reduction” with respect to faith and reason, as there is yet a certain ‘dialectic’ at play—in that faith cannot function without a measure of understanding, nor reason without a measure of (epistemological) faith. However, the greater dialectic here is that between the sort of faith inherent to the intellect and faith as belief in the authoritative truth of Revelation. That there is a tension between these in Cusan thought is undeniable, that it is “fruitful”, for either philosophy or theology, is rather less certain. Yet Dahm too does not remark on the fact that these two distinct notions of faith are at work in Cusanus.

By placing such stress on the role of grace and passivity, Dahm also rather misses the importance to Cusanus of providing an effective means for conversion. It was crucial for him to articulate a model of faith that did not entail passive submission to the authority of Revelation (which “hardened” infidels would simply reject). In order to effect conversion amongst non-believers, one must be able to show them that Jesus Christ is

---

<sup>139</sup> Dahm (2006), p. 259: “Die menschliche Vernunft ist von Natur aus so auf die mit Gott, der ewigen Weisheit, identische Wahrheit ausgerichtet, dass sie allein in ihr Leben und Erfüllung findet. Doch kann sie aus eigenem Vermögen, das—abgesehen von der seinhaften Schwäche—durch die Sünde zusätzlich gelämt ist, ihr Ziel nicht erreichen. Aus diesem Dilemma gibt es nur einen Ausweg: Die Selbsterschließung der Wahrheit, die ihre Entsprechung findet in der Aufnahmebereitschaft des *intellectus*.” Also, pp. 266–267: “Um die heilende Kraft des Glaubens zu wissen, ist ‘die höchste Wissenschaft. Durch sie gelangt die Seele zu allem Ersehnten’. [...] Dieser Glaube steht nicht in der Verfügung des Menschen. Er ist nicht Ausdruck eigener Kraft, sondern ganz Gabe Gottes.”

<sup>140</sup> Dahm (2006), p. 273.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., pp. 272–273.

<sup>142</sup> h *Sermo* 130, 8 9–18.



the correct conclusion of rational thinking, and thus to provide 'objective' corroboration, as it were, of the truth of the Faith. To subjugate reason to Christian dogma is precisely what Cusanus wishes *not* to do.<sup>143</sup> The model of faith described by Dahm lacks the universality Cusanus is striving for, to the extent that it would only appeal to believers.

In this connection Martin Thurner's interpretation is similarly problematic.<sup>144</sup> Like Dahm, he tries to maintain the priority of faith in the *fides-ratio* dialectic by asserting that, to Cusanus, human knowledge is only possible on the presupposition of certain truths revealed to us as a gift of God, emphasizing the passivity and incapability of man with respect to these truths.<sup>145</sup> However because the God-given "truth principles" on which men must rely comprise the structure of their very own intellects, and thus may be found merely through a process of inward reflection, at best only a weak sense of reliance upon grace can be derived in this way.<sup>146</sup>

Thurner works from the position that the *lumen fidei* is the *lumen intellectus* in Cusanus, and that the Faith thus is the condition of possibility of knowledge. However, he maintains, although the "light of faith" encompasses all possible ways of grasping God, the intellect is in fact only *one*

---

<sup>143</sup> Kremer acknowledges this fact (Kremer [2006], p.90); Flasch also rightly recognizes it: "Cusanus suchte, den christlichen Glauben psychologisch—faktisch voraussetzend, eine von dieser Tatsache unabhängig argumentierende Philosophie der Trinität und der Inkarnation, die im Prinzip allen Menschen einsichtig sein sollte" (Flasch [1998], p. 26); and also: "Er wollte die *wahre theologia* argumentierend dahin entwickeln, daß sie sich nicht auf die Autorität—sei's der Bibel, sei's der Kirche—stützt, sondern daß sie sich zu dem Einen denkend erhebt, von dem her jede Tradition und jeder Text und jede Kirche als Mutmassung, *coniectura*, der *einen* Wahrheit einsichtig wird [...]" (ibid., p. 54).

<sup>144</sup> Thurner, M. *Gott als das offenbare Geheimnis nach Nikolaus von Kues*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001.

<sup>145</sup> "[...] der Mensch die Ermöglichsbedingungen für die Verwirklichung des ihm wesenseigenen (natürlichen) Vernunftvollzuges nicht selbst hervorbringen kann, sondern gerade in einem Zurücklassen der eigenen Begrenztheit von Gott her empfangen muss. [...] Weil menschliche Erkenntnis sich nur unter Voraussetzung der von Gott gegebenen Wahrheitsprinzipien verwirklichen kann, der Rückbezug auf die von Gott her eröffnete Wahrheitsmitteilung aber der Vollzug des *Glaubens* ist, wird das natürliche Erkenntnisstreben des Menschen im Grunde stets von einem Glaubensakt ermöglicht und getragen." Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>146</sup> This also comes out when Thurner compares Cusanus' view of the role of grace in human understanding with that of Thomas. He admits they cannot be said to share the same view on this, since Thomas clearly regards the intellect as reliant upon an influx of grace from without ("Gerade im Hinblick darauf, dass das Glaubenslicht der menschlichen Vernunftnatur nicht schon innewohnt, sondern ihr—diese überhöhend—hinzugefügt wird, versteht Thomas das *lumen fidei* auch als das Licht der Gnade [*lumen gratiae*]), whereas to Cusanus this *lumen fidei* is immanent to the intellect (ibid., pp. 192–194).

of these ways, and therefore the *lumen fidei* and *lumen intellectus* are not coextensive.<sup>147</sup> In this way he seeks to maintain the priority of faith in the *fides-ratio* dialectic in Cusan thought, and to prevent it from being subsumed by the intellect.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, the identification of the “mental light of knowledge” [*geistiges Erkenntnislicht*] as only one dimension of God’s revelation to man is incorrect, as Cusanus is adamant that the latter can *only* be apprehended *intellectualiter*.

This is already an implicit consequence of *De docta ignorantia*, where Cusanus makes clear that the special connection between man and God is the former’s possession of an intellectual soul, which sets him above everything else in creation and just below the angels, and by virtue of which he is an image of the absolute and contracted maximum. For faith to be apprehensible in any way other than through the intellect, which is the most divine aspect of our nature, would be inappropriate. That faith pertains pre-eminently to the intellect comes out even more strongly in the correspondence related to the so-called “Tegernsee debate”—where Cusanus criticizes the notion of a purely affective theology, which he regards as impossible, and in some of the later sermons—both of which will be examined below. The priority of faith over reason (which Cusanus indeed maintains) cannot, therefore, be justified by appeal to another, non-intellectual means of apprehending God.

Klaus Kremer, in his 2006 essay, sets out to answer the question “whether the Cusan predication teaches knowledge of the trinitarian God on the grounds of pure natural reason”.<sup>149</sup> In his estimation, Cusanus does maintain in the sermons that it is possible for man to attain a certain knowledge of God based on investigation of the things in this world, based on the likeness of creation to its creator.<sup>150</sup> However the sermons also emphasize the limitations of philosophical or “natural” knowledge of God.<sup>151</sup> In particular, the possibility of such knowledge does not mean that

---

<sup>147</sup> “Das Glaubenslicht umfasst die Gesamtheit aller Weisen der Offenbarkeit Gottes unter Einschluss insbesondere auch der erfahrungshaft-affektiven Momente, während das Erkenntnislicht nur *eine* Dimension von Offenbarung ist, eine ‘Teilmenge’ des Glaubenslichtes sozusagen.” *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>148</sup> “Die cusanische Bestimmung des Glaubensaktes als Ermöglichungsbedingung der Erkenntnis hebt somit keineswegs im hegelschen Sinn den Glauben in seiner Funktion für das Denken auf, sondern begreift vielmehr umgekehrt den natürlichen Erkenntnisvollzug aus seiner Integration in das ihm als Zielgrund stets übergeordnete Glaubensgeschehen.” *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>149</sup> Kremer (2006), p. 53: “ob das cusanische Predigtwerk [. . .] eine Erkenntnis des trinitarischen Gottes aus rein natürlichen Vernunftgründen lehrt”.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 64.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the understanding does not still require the assistance of grace.<sup>152</sup> “Natural” knowledge of God is dark and obscure, whereas knowledge through faith is clear and certain, and Kremer refers in this connection to a distinction made in Sermon 283 between revelation “in the light of nature” and revelation “in Jesus Christ”.<sup>153</sup> Based on this distinction, he writes that Roth was wrong to assert that Cusanus had transformed the traditional scholastic division between natural reason and revelation as sources of knowledge about God.<sup>154</sup>

Kremer thus tries, like Dahm, to show that there is a fundamental difference between the kind of knowledge about God attained through reason and that acquired through faith, and, again like Dahm, does not recognize Cusanus’ repeated deliberate attempts to prove the contrary. Kremer objects strongly to Roth’s characterization of the *fides-ratio* relation as *implicatio-explicatio*; yet without really explaining why, except to say that he failed to take into account the aforementioned two types of revelation. However, the distinction between revelation “in the light of nature” and revelation “in Jesus Christ” is not one between *ratio* and *fides*, as Kremer would have it, but between *ratio* and *intellectus*—insofar as Christ is the intelligible Word of God. And furthermore, the identification of faith as the *complicatio* of reason is firmly grounded in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*.<sup>155</sup>

That faith is the *complicatio intellectus*, according to Cusanus, is a consequence of the hypostatic union, whereby human nature was conjoined with the divine nature in the contracted and Absolute maximum, Jesus Christ. Cusanus clearly explains in Book III, chapters 1–4 how Christ’s dual nature as God and man entails that he be the contraction, or enfolding, of all creaturely knowledge. The pinnacle of creation is human nature, which

---

<sup>152</sup> Oddly, Kremer supports this remark with reference to *Idiota de sapientia*—probably the most positive of all the treatises with respect to asserting man’s ability to discover divine wisdom purely through a process of reflection on the nature of his own understanding. Nevertheless, he sees the magnet example—whereby iron (i.e., the intellect) only moves towards the magnet (i.e., God/*sapientia*) by virtue of the the magnet’s attractive power, which draws the iron towards it—to exemplify the fact the understanding is dependent upon faith: “So würden wir uns niemals zur Suche nach der ewigen Weisheit aufmachen, wenn diese selbst uns nicht rufen (*quaedam vocatio*) würde”. Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 78: “Hinsichtlich des *Predigers* Nikolaus kann ich daher das Ergebnis von Ulrich Roth in keiner Weise bestätigen, ‘daß Cusanus das hochscholastische Schema der beiden Erkenntnisquellen natürliche Vernunft und Offenbarung völlig transformiert’ habe”.

<sup>155</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, ch. 11 (*Mysteria fidei*), p. 152: « Intellectus autem est fidei explicatio. Dirigitur igitur intellectus per fidem, et fides per intellectum extenditur. »

as a “microcosm” of the universe enfolds all the possibilities of creation (ch. 3); and the essence of human nature is the intellect. Therefore, Christ, as the perfection of human nature, is pre-eminently intellectual and enfolds all the possibilities of human understanding. In rejecting Roth’s characterization of faith as the *complicatio intellectus*, Kremer makes no reference to these chapters, nor offers any alternate interpretation of them.<sup>156</sup>

Kremer ultimately maintains that Cusanus’ employment of philosophical reasoning in theology seeks no more than to show how reason can be used to support the plausibility of the Faith.<sup>157</sup> He attributes the apparent tension between faith and reason in Cusan theology to the fact that Cusanus employs various approaches to theological understanding, making use of both “a natural knowledge of God as well as one made possible through Christ”; but in every case, according to Kremer, faith in the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ is the only access to God.<sup>158</sup> Kremer tries to dissolve the appearance of *fides-ratio* tension in Cusan thought by saying that the Cardinal has no systematic position on the subject.<sup>159</sup> However, while Cusanus produced no systematic theology in the sense of a *summa theologiae*, it is evident that he took great pains to develop a unified and consistent teaching on the relation of faith and reason; and furthermore, that the desire to harmonize philosophy and theology is a core concern in both his treatises and predicative works. Kremer’s account thus does not accurately reflect Cusanus’ project.

As shown above, there has been no consensus on Cusanus’ position on faith and reason, and opinions have ranged between extremes. As it is possible to find some textual substantiation for many of these views somewhere in the Cusan oeuvre, it is unsurprising that there is ongoing debate as to whether Cusanus was a fideist or a rationalist, a nominalist or a realist, a radical innovator or a defender of tradition and orthodoxy. Commentators who have stressed one aspect of Cusanus’ view on faith and reason at the expense of another have usually done so in an attempt to render a

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp. 78–80.

<sup>157</sup> “Es sind verschiedene Ansätze bzw. Ausgangspunkte, welche die Vernunft entdeckt und worin sie einen Hinweis auf die Wirklichkeit des einen Gottes findet.” Kremer (2006), p. 80.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 80–81: “[...] eine natürliche als auch eine über Christus mögliche Gotteserkenntnis.”

<sup>159</sup> “Von einer Systematisierung gar dieser von mir sogenannten cusanischen Wege kann bei Cusanus keine Rede sein.” Ibid., p. 80.

consistent and unproblematic account of his thought. However, this cannot be achieved without sacrificing a certain degree of accuracy.

To maintain, as some have, that the tension between faith and reason is unproblematic, or even “fruitful”, does not reflect Cusanus’ own attitude on the matter, and is moreover a retroactive and unhistorical judgment; for there was nothing fruitful or benign about this tension in the minds of medieval theologians. Rather it was just this issue that gave rise to the *Wegestreit*, which divided theologians into warring camps and caused great academic strife.<sup>160</sup> While Cusanus was not directly involved in these disputes, neither was he removed from their sphere of influence.

Furthermore, since *ratio* in the medieval period was indissolubly associated with the Aristotelian philosophy, there is much to be revealed about Cusanus’ position on faith and reason by examining his relationship to the Aristotelian tradition—a subject which has as yet received relatively little attention in the research, due to the widely-held (and mistaken) view that Cusanus advocates the rejection of Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>161</sup> As this view is sometimes cited in favour of a fideistic interpretation of Cusan thought, it will be important to redress the issue through a careful examination of Cusanus’ position with respect to the Aristotelian tradition.

---

<sup>160</sup> A prominent example of this was the heated 1414 disputes at Köln over whether the university should patronize the *via moderna* or *via antiqua*, wherein each side accused the other of endangering academic unity and the Christian faith. See Ehrle, F. *Der Sentenzenkommentar Peters von Candia des Pisaner Papstes Alexanders V.* Münster: Aschendorff, 1925, pp. 335, 338 for the related documents; on these disputes cf. Hoenen (2003), esp. pp. 15–16.

<sup>161</sup> For example, Kremer uses this supposedly established fact (along with its counterpart: that Cusanus was a thoroughgoing Platonist) to support his assertion that Cusanus does not countenance the use of reason for any “Aristotelian” *Gottesbeweis* (cf. *ibid.*, p. 64).



PART ONE

FAITH AND REASON IN THE DEBATES AND CONTROVERSIES  
SURROUNDING THE RECEPTION OF CUSANUS' WORKS BY  
HIS CONTEMPORARIES





Because he worked outside of the university arena, Cusanus' treatises were not subject to the amount of scrutiny they would have received had they been published within in the scholastic milieu.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the relatively limited dissemination of his works during his lifetime shielded Cusanus, for the most part, from critical eyes. However there are two very prominent cases where Cusanus' works came under severe criticism. These two attacks came from the university and the monastic realms, respectively, and their reactions to Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance represent two very different—almost polar opposite—points of view. These cases are very pertinent to the present study as both centrally concern the relation between faith and reason—a concern which is in turn very reflective of the period.

In the first of these cases Cusanus' treatise *De docta ignorantia* was examined by the Heidelberg theologian Johannes Wenck, who accused Cusanus in no uncertain terms of representing a heretical doctrine which undermined the very foundation of theology.<sup>2</sup> The nature of Wenck's criticism well exemplifies the complex of issues surrounding heresy in the fifteenth century, and how closely these were tied to institutionally-sanctioned modes of discourse. Cusanus' subsequent reaction to Wenck's criticism is furthermore significant for its radical critique of scholastic theology and defence of new methodology, based on the complex integration of faith and reason presented in *De docta ignorantia*.

The second case concerns the criticism of Cusanus' works by the Carthusian prior Vincent of Aggsbach, a few years following Wenck's attack. Vincent was also reacting to Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance (although he had not actually read *De docta ignorantia*, but only an encomium of the same written by one of Cusanus' supporters at Tegernsee), as well as to his most explicitly mystical work, *De visione Dei*. The crux of Vincent's opposition to Cusanus was what he viewed as the latter's overly

---

<sup>1</sup> That said, there are some cases of non-academic writers coming under the criticism of university doctors, most notably Ruusbroec, whose works were attacked by Chancellor of the University of Paris, John Gerson. See Hoenen, M. "Translating Mystical Texts from the Vernacular into Latin. The Intentions and Strategies behind Laurentius Surius' Edition of John of Ruusbroec's Complete Works (Cologne 1552)" in Beccarisi, A., et al., eds., *Per Per-scrutationem philosophicam. Neuen Perspektiven der mittelalterlichen Forschung*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008, 348–374.

<sup>2</sup> Vansteenbergh, E., ed. *Le "De ignota litteratura" de Jean Wenck de Herrenberg contre Nicolas de Cuse*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1910.

intellectual and 'academic' approach to mystical theology, which he furthermore regarded as representative of scholastic corruption. For his own, very different, reasons, Vincent also saw Cusanus' doctrine as destructive of both theology and the Church.

The debates over mystical theology between Cusanus and Wenck, on the one hand, and Cusanus and Aggsbach, on the other, highlight the particular tension into which Cusanus brought faith and reason with his doctrine of learned ignorance. For the essence of Wenck's attack on Cusanus was that the latter had undermined the foundation of reason and thus the very possibility of rational theology; whereas the core of Aggsbach's attack was that Cusanus had rationalized theology to the point of trivializing the role of faith, hope and love—the affective triad on which his approach to theology was based. Furthermore, both Wenck and Aggsbach were ardent supporters of the conciliarist movement and regarded Cusanus as a traitor to the Church, bringing a strongly political dimension to their criticism.

That two authors with such radically diverging theological perspectives were able to condemn Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance for allegedly committing the same evils (namely, heresy, corruption, and the destruction of theology, the Church, and the Faith itself), however for precisely opposite reasons, reflects the ambiguity inherent to this doctrine: that learned ignorance can appear from the perspective of Aristotelian-based scholastic theology to be the abandonment of reason, and from the perspective of an affectively-oriented mystical theology to entail the abandonment of faith. It is certain that Cusanus intended neither; however in his attempt to reconcile the requirements of faith with the dictates of reason within the context of Christian theology, he brought the two into a state of high tension.

Thus it will be of benefit to examine these two debates in detail, beginning with that between Cusanus and Johannes Wenck. In addition to the documents and letters explicitly connected to Wenck's and Aggsbach's attacks, certain of Cusanus' treatises are also of direct relevance—those which formed the focal point of criticism (such as *De visione Dei*), and others which manifest the effects of that criticism on Cusanus' later work (namely, the *Idiota* treatises). These works will therefore be examined within the context of the issues concerned in these debates.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE CUSANUS-WENCK DEBATE

Johannes Wenck of Herrenberg (1396–1459),<sup>1</sup> who later went on to be instrumental in the introduction of realism to the hitherto nominalist University of Heidelberg, was trained in the Albertist school of the University of Paris.<sup>2</sup> He registered in the theology faculty at Heidelberg in 1426, and remained a professor there until the end of his life.<sup>3</sup> Although trained as an Albertist, he at some point prior to 1442 shifted to Thomism.<sup>4</sup> This fact plays a significant role in his debate with Cusanus, insofar as

---

<sup>1</sup> For information on the life and thought of Johannes Wenck see, for example, Kuhnekath, K. *Die Philosophie des Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg im Vergleich zu den Lehren des Nikolaus von Kues*. Köln: University of Köln Press, 1975; also Haubst, R. *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> According to one commentator, Wenck was “one of the best products of the Albertist school in Paris” Cf. Gabriel, A. “‘Via antiqua’ and ‘Via moderna’ and the Migration of Paris Students and Masters to the German Universities in the 15th Century” in *MM* 9 (1974), 439–483, p. 451. On the emergence of the Albertist school at Paris, cf. Hoenen, M., ed. *Albertus Magnus und der Albertismus*. Leiden: Brill, 1995; and Meersseman, G. *Geschichte des Albertismus. Band 1. Die Pariser Anfänge des Kölner Albertismus*. Paris, 1932.

<sup>3</sup> Töpke, G. *Die Matrikel der Universität Heidelberg*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1884, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> This shift certainly occurred at least by the time of his writing *De ignota litteratura* (1442)—as exemplified by his emphasis in this work on the necessity of sensible images, or “fantasmata” for human understanding (e.g.: “Repugnat [...] aliter hominem comprehendere quam comprehensibiliter et in ymagine, cum, ex 3<sup>o</sup> *De Anima*, hoc sit fantasma ad intellectum quod est color ad visum [...] ergo nec sine fantasmate contingit nos intelligere” *De ignota*, p. 21)—but probably already by 1436, as the necessity of images is emphasized in his “Buchlin von der Seele” (see section below, “John of Gelnhausen and the origin of the debate”). This contrasts sharply with his response to the *Quaestio* “Utrum sine phantasmate contingat nos intelligere?” in his commentary on *De anima* III (c. 1426), which still follows the Albertist position that once a person attains a sufficient amount of data through sensible images they can on this basis gain further knowledge without the aid of such images. Haubst (1955), p. 87. On the Albertist view regarding sensible images and knowledge, cf. Hoenen, M. Article: “Albertism” in Lagerlund, H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2010, Part 1, 44–51: “It was the firm belief of Albertists that humans can have direct knowledge of separate substances already in their earthly life. On this point Albertism distinguished itself from Thomism and Nominalism. For representatives of both these schools argued that, according to Aristotle, all human knowledge begins with the senses. Therefore substances that are not perceived by the senses, such as separate substances, cannot be known directly, but only indirectly through the sensible effects they produce.” The Albertist however maintained that: “If humans have collected sufficient sense data, they are able to turn their intellect immediately to the source of the intelligibility of that sense data, namely the agent intellect, which is itself either a separate substance or a direct emanation of

one of Wenck's harshest criticisms against the Cardinal arises out of his Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle on the necessity of sensible images for knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Wenck received a copy of *De docta ignorantia* around 1443,<sup>6</sup> and responded by writing a critical treatise, entitled *De ignota litteratura* (*On Unknown Learning*), which he dedicated to a certain John of Gelnhausen, former Abbot of Maulbronn. Gelnhausen was an acquaintance of both Wenck and Cusanus, and served as the intermediary of their debate, since neither author addressed his adversary directly; rather both *De ignota litteratura* and Cusanus' subsequent reply, the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), were dedicated and addressed to Gelnhausen.

Although Wenck's objections to Cusanus in *De ignota litteratura* are putatively based only on the latter's statements in *De docta ignorantia*, we shall see that his criticism is inextricably interwoven with church political and doctrinal factors extending well beyond that treatise. In fact there are two major external factors underlying Wenck's attack: First was the fact that Wenck was a staunch conciliarist and resented Cusanus' switch to and subsequent efforts in support of the papal cause. Second was Wenck's concern about the propagation of heretical "Beghardian" teachings (which he viewed as carrying on the legacy of the condemned), and the spread of lay devotional movements in his time.

In order properly to understand the criticism in *De ignota litteratura* and Cusanus' response to it in the *Apologia*, one must therefore view both against the background of Wenck's previous involvement with Cusanus in the political arena, as well as the former's fierce opposition to what he perceived as subversive and heretical approaches to theology. We will examine these in turn. Because Gelnhausen formed the fulcrum of this debate, and in a way served to instigate it (since it was he who gave the *De ignota litteratura* to Cusanus and, possibly had given a copy of *De docta ignorantia* to Wenck in the first place), we will briefly remark on his role in the emergence of the debate before turning to the texts themselves.

---

a separate substance. In both cases, humans can know separate substances without first turning to the senses."

<sup>5</sup> Thomas claims that knowledge is obtained when the active intellect abstracts a concept from an image received from the senses. See Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* III, 4, lect. 7; III, V, lect. 10; and III, 8, Lect. 13. For more on this subject, see Hoenen, M. "Metaphysik und Intellektlehre: die aristotelische Lehre des 'intellectus agens' im Schnittpunkt der mittelalterlichen Diskussion um die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis" in *Theologie und Philosophie* 70 (1995), 405–413.

<sup>6</sup> According to Haubst, written no earlier than March 1442, and no later than the first half of 1443. Haubst (1955), p. 99.

### WENCK AND CONCILIARISM: THE POLITICAL MOTIVES BEHIND THE DEBATE

Cusanus had joined the council of Basel in 1432, having come originally as a lawyer.<sup>7</sup> While there, he joined in the activities of the council, becoming part of a committee on faith, in which capacity he assisted in negotiations with the Hussites.<sup>8</sup> In 1437, however, Cusanus switched from the conciliar to the papal camp.<sup>9</sup> In 1438 Pope Eugene chose Cusanus to win over the ambivalent German princes to the papal cause, and for the next ten years, Cusanus worked intensely in support of the pope, representing his interests at numerous meetings, provincial synods and diets,<sup>10</sup> often debating the same conciliarists on whose side he had been in Basel—a fact which aroused the ire of some, including Johannes Wenck.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> He went to defend Ulrich von Manderscheid's contested claim to the Archbishopric of Trier. On Cusanus' early activities as a canon lawyer, including his representation of Manderscheid, see Watanabe, M. "The Episcopal Election of 1430 in Trier and Nicholas of Cusa" in *Concord and Reform. Nicolas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 117–131; also Vansteenbergh (1920), 81–101.

<sup>8</sup> These negotiations culminated in the Prague Compacts, signed with the moderate Hussites in 1433, which permitted them to retain some of their divergent practices in exchange for their recognition of emperor and pope. On Cusanus' involvement in negotiations with the Hussites at the Basel council, see Hallauer, H. "Das Glaubensgespräch mit den Hussiten" in *MFCG* 9. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1971, 53–75. On Cusanus' letters to the Hussites, see Weier, R. "Christliche Existenz und Kirchlichkeit als Kernproblem in den Briefen des Cusanus an die Hussiten" in *MFCG* 13. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1978, 264–278. These letters are edited and translated into English in Izbiicki, T., ed. and trans. *Nicholas of Cusa. Writings on Church and Reform (I Tatti Renaissance Library 33)*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 2–85, 335–356.

<sup>9</sup> There are contrasting opinions on the motives and reasons behind this switch. Watanabe, for example, argues that Cusanus' failure successfully to defend Manderscheid's claim at Basel, followed by the latter's lengthy and divisive struggle against the council's decision, were decisive factors (Watanabe [2001], pp. 100–101). Meuthen is similarly sympathetic (Meuthen, E. "Nikolaus von Kues in der Entscheidung zwischen Konzil und Papst" in *MFCG* 9, Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1971, 19–33). Stieber emphasizes the opportunity provided by supporting Eugene for the young canon lawyer to advance his own career (Stieber, J. *Pope Eugenius IV, the Council of Basel, and the Secular and Ecclesiastical Authorities in the Empire*. Leiden: Brill, 1978, p. 402).

<sup>10</sup> On Cusanus' activities in support of Eugene IV, which earned him the title "Hercules of the Eugenians" (bestowed upon him by his friend Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pius II), see Watanabe, M. "The Council of Florence and the Acceptatio of Mainz" in *Concord and Reform. Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 103–115, esp. pp. 109 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Stieber in particular has highlighted the resentment created by Cusanus' anti-conciliarist activities on behalf of Eugene, and how this translated into opposition to his attempts at reform during his 1451–52 legation which were often regarded as hypocritical: "To many former supporters of the Council of Basel, it seemed incongruous that Nicholas of Cusa, the enemy of a reform council, should now present himself as the champion of reform in the church." Stieber (1978), p. 341.

Wenck's conciliarism is notable for going against the grain of the majority at Heidelberg, where papal support was dominant.<sup>12</sup> He was with the conciliar party at Basel in 1439, and attended the Reichstag in Mainz on the party's behalf in 1441, where Cusanus spoke against conciliarist leader John of Segovia;<sup>13</sup> and was also present in Frankfurt one year later, where Cusanus spoke against conciliar representative Nicholas Panormitanus.<sup>14</sup> On these occasions Wenck was witness to, and grew to resent, the fervour and success with which the so-called "Hercules of the Eugenians" defended the papal cause. *De ignota litteratura*, having been written no later than 1443, was penned in the wake of Wenck's active involvement in the conciliar struggle.<sup>15</sup> There was thus a strong political undercurrent to the criticism in *De ignota litteratura*, which Cusanus himself would point out in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, asserting that Wenck's resentment of Cusanus' papal support was the true motive behind his attack.

#### WENCK'S OPPOSITION TO LAY MYSTICISM

As much as conciliarism stood in the background of the debate, it was never explicitly brought up by Wenck in his polemical treatise as a point of criticism against Cusanus. Rather was one of Wenck's primary modes of attack, in *De ignota litteratura*, the accusation of heresy, based on the association of central tenets of learned ignorance with condemned doctrines. Thus he accused the doctrine of being "dissonant to our faith, offensive to pious minds, and vainly leading away from obedience to the

<sup>12</sup> See Ritter, G. *Via antiqua und via moderna auf den deutschen Universitäten des XV. Jahrhunderts*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1922, p. 66: "Die 'nominalistische' Heidelberger Universität hatte sich schon seit langen Jahren (spätestens seit 1434) auf den Konzilien äußerst zurückhaltend benommen, ja eine geradezu ängstlich papale Haltung gezeigt; in diesem Papalismus ist sie sich vor wie nach 1452 unverändert gleich geblieben."

<sup>13</sup> Johannes de Segovia's response to Cusanus' speech is edited in Meuthen, E., ed. *Acta Cusana. Band I*. Hamburg: Meiner, 1976, pp. 328–332 (Nr. 476). Johannes Wenck's notes concerning Cusanus' speech are also edited in *ibid.*, pp. 326–328 (nr. 475); on Wenck's presence on this occasion and the notes he made to Cusanus' speech (of which we have no written account apart from third-party descriptions), see Stieber (1978), pp. 226–227; also Haubst (1955), pp. 48, 96.

<sup>14</sup> On June 22, 1442. This speech is edited in *AC Band I*, pp. 375–421 (Nr. 519). For more on Cusanus' speech on this occasion, see also Stieber (1978), pp. 238–240.

<sup>15</sup> Wenck's support of conciliarism may be documented at least as late as 1445, according to Haubst, based on the content of a sermon dating from this year. See Haubst (1955), p. 48. Thus there is no doubt that he was still a conciliarist at the time of writing his polemical treatise against Cusanus.

divine”.<sup>16</sup> The condemned doctrine with which he primarily seeks to tarnish Cusanus’ name is that the human and divine natures are the same; however, he does this less through a philosophical analysis of passages in *De docta* which allegedly assert this heresy than by repeatedly comparing Cusanus to the “Beghards” of Strasbourg, “who were condemned by their bishop” for maintaining their oneness of nature with the divine.<sup>17</sup> The Beghards and Beguines were lay religious communities which were repeatedly condemned in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries for heretical beliefs,<sup>18</sup> but regained approval in the fifteenth century, in part as a result of Cusanus’ support. As we shall see, Wenck’s attack on Cusanus *via* Beghardism reflects a deep-seated distrust of lay devotional movements as a force erosive of church hierarchy and orthodoxy.

Wenck had a curious attitude towards popular religion. On the one hand, he seemed generally opposed to lay devotional movements and was very suspicious of what he called the *abgeschieden Leben*, or “detached life”, and of all who wished to avoid taking orders in legitimate, hierarchically-organized monasteries.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he is the author of a small devotional handbook composed in the vernacular, the *Buchlin von der selen* (1436).<sup>20</sup> Intended as a popularization of scholastic philosophy and theology, this is not what we would expect from such a fierce defender of institutional learning. However, it was written not for

<sup>16</sup> “[...] fidei nostre dissona, piarum mencium offensiva, nec non ab obsequio divino vaniter abductiva [...]”. Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), pp. 29–30. The articles condemned by the bishop of Strasbourg to which Wenck refers in *De ignota* are printed in Döllinger, I. *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters. Teil II. Dokumente vornehmlich zur Geschichte der Waldenser und Katharer*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1890, pp. 389–394.

<sup>18</sup> Already censured at several synods within Germany (Trier in 1227 and 1310; Mainz in 1259 and 1310), they were most notably condemned at the Council of Vienna, in the act “Ad nostrum qui” (May 6, 1312), which enumerated 8 “heretical” statements attributed to the Beghards and Beguines. In summary, these were that it is possible, in this life, for man to achieve perfection and ultimate blessedness (“finalis beatitudo”); that the rational nature of man alone is sufficient to attain this perfection, and thus that grace is not required (“anima non indiget lumine gloriae”); that the perfected man is free of sin; that the perfected man is no longer subject to the authority of the Church; that prayer and fasting are no longer necessary for one who has attained perfection; that good acts are not necessary for perfected men; and that perfected men need no longer participate in the Sacrament. Denzinger, H. *Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*. Freiburg: Herder, 2007, pp. 388–389.

<sup>19</sup> As evinced by his correspondence with Johannes Gelnhausen. See section below, “Wenck’s response to *De docta ignorantia*: the *De ignota literatura*”.

<sup>20</sup> Heid. Hs. 959, 99r–113v (UB Heidelberg). Edition: Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg. *Das Büchlein von der Seele*. Steer, G., ed. München: Fink Verlag, 1967.



a lay brotherhood but for a prince elect<sup>21</sup> and, despite its form, the content of the work itself is conservative and scholastic in nature.<sup>22</sup> One may thus reasonably surmise that its composition reflects the author's concern to counteract the 'irrationalist' tendencies of lay theology by providing some sound and orthodox instruction in the vernacular, rather than an affirmation as such of its pursuit.<sup>23</sup>

We know that Wenck had written and preached about the Beghardian problem well before the writing of *De ignota litteratura*,<sup>24</sup> and had criticized the *vita abstracta* of the Beghards in writing already by 1431.<sup>25</sup> Wenck also possessed a number of letters written by others strongly opposed to the movement, which he carefully read and annotated.<sup>26</sup> His criticism of

<sup>21</sup> The book was written for "kurfürstlichen Hofmeister" Michael I. von Wertheim. Ibid., pp. 17–18.

<sup>22</sup> The soul is explained based on the Aristotelian model of *De anima*, but without scholastic terminology. The work reflects Wenck's Thomistic orientation, emphasizing the necessity of visual images ("sehenliche vorbildunge") for understanding (ibid., pp. 35–36). The proper characterization of this work has been the object of some debate so far. Steer maintains that it belongs to a specific genre, which he characterizes as the "Professor-Traktat" and insists must be sharply distinguished from works of "Kleriker, Klosterleute und Volk bestimmten Gebrauchsschriften" (ibid., p. 57). Earlier authors, like Ritter, however referred to the *Buchlin* also as a "mystischer Laientraktat" (Ritter [1936], p. 427) and "ein merkwürdiges Mittelding zwischen scholastischer Belehrung, in stark populisierter Form, und unmittelbar seelsorgerlicher Erbauung" (ibid., p. 428). In any event, it is clear that the *Buchlin* does not concern mystical devotion as a process of unification with God, as Wenck's remarks indicate that such unification is bestowed upon the soul entirely by grace and only after death ("Wann nu des menschen sele, die untotlich ist, von dem libe scheidet, ist die dann begabet mit der gnade gottis, so wirt sie ewiglichen leben by got [...] ist sie siecher des ewigen lebens und das nach der urstende auch jr lip ewig freude gewynnet, vereynt mit jr in dem himelrich ewiglichen zu leben jn vollkommener gnade" [Steer, ed. (1967), p. 46]).

<sup>23</sup> Haubst suggested something similar when he posited that Wenck's *Buchlin* was written deliberately as a "thomistisches Gegenstück" to an earlier booklet on mystical theology written in the vernacular ("Eyn deutsch Theologia") and possibly by a Heidelberg colleague, for the purpose of demonstrating "daß eine gesunde Theologie und Frömmigkeit auch ohne jede Beimischung von, wie er die Dinge sah, eckhartisch-begardischer Ps.-Mystik auskommen könne...". Haubst, R. "Johannes von Franckfurt als der mutmaßliche Verfasser von "Eyn deutsch Theologia" in *Scholastik* 33 (1958), 375–398, pp. 389–390.

<sup>24</sup> As attested to by John of Gelnhausen. See section below, "Wenck's response to *De docta ignorantia*: the *De ignota litteratura*".

<sup>25</sup> In notes made under the heading "Contra abstractam vitam Beghardorum". Cod. Mc. 31, 35r (UB Tübingen).

<sup>26</sup> Including one of unidentified authorship forwarded to Wenck by its recipient, and a copy of a 1438 letter by Zurich cantor Felix Hemmerlin to the bishop of Constance. Cod. Vat. Pal. 600, 228r–233r, 226r–227r; described in Haubst (1955), pp. 56–57, 118; also more on Hemmerlin's letter in Baum, W. *Nicolaus Cusanus in Tirol. Das Wirken des Philosophen und Reformators als Fürstbischof von Brixen*. Bozen: Athesia, 1983, pp. 129–130. Notably, Hemmerlin, who was as fiercely opposed to the "abstracta vita" as was Wenck, was among those who protested Cusanus' bishopric in Brixen.



Beghardianism and the detached life was closely tied to his enmity for Eckhart, whom he regarded as their spiritual leader.<sup>27</sup> Thus his attack on Cusanus in 1442 for representing a new Beghardian threat had roots in over 10 years of related anti-heresy engagement on his part.<sup>28</sup> We know moreover that Beghardianism had been a topic of institutional concern at Heidelberg University for some time, and that other doctors before Wenck had spoken out against its related heresies.<sup>29</sup> Fighting the threat posed by Beghardism had also been one of Wenck's activities at Basel; and it is notable in this connection that Eugene IV had passed a bull protecting the rights of the Beghards,<sup>30</sup> for which reason papalism itself became to Wenck synonymous with support of the 'Beghardian heresy'. Merely by virtue of his support of Eugene, Cusanus was tarnished with this guilt long before Wenck had read *De docta ignorantia*—a guilt by association which would have only been strengthened by Cusanus' own active support of the Beghards a few years later.

During his legation journey (1451–52),<sup>31</sup> Cusanus issued decrees—later confirmed by Nicholas V—protecting Beghardian and Beghuine cooperatives.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Cusanus' attitude towards these movements was not one of simple affirmation, as Wenck would have it, as in fact Cusanus'

---

<sup>27</sup> Eckhart worked in Strasbourg from 1313–1324, where he was closely associated with the Beguines. He championed detachment as the highest of all Christian virtues in his work *Von Abgeschiedenheit* (c. 1318). A recent study of this work can be found in Enders, M. *Gelassenheit und Abgeschiedenheit—Studien zur deutschen Mystik*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Wenck had already penned a very brief treatise against Eckhart in 1430, entitled *De ymagine et similitudine contra eghardicos*.

<sup>29</sup> Including Nikolaus Magni, an older colleague and former teacher of Wenck, who wrote a treatise *De superstitionibus* in 1405 criticizing hermits and the reclusive life. See Haubst (1958), pp. 391–392.

<sup>30</sup> May 12, 1431 bull: "Ad audientiam nostrum". On Eugene's efforts on behalf of the Beghards, see Haubst (1955), pp. 118–119. I was unfortunately unable to find a copy of the bull itself, but Eugene's intervention on behalf of the Beghards and Beguines is well-documented. For example, the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*: "Le pape Eugène IV, à son tour, en 1431, intervient en faveur des béghards et des béghuines orthodoxes, injustement persécutés [...]." Paris: Letouzey et Ané. Vol. II, Part I (1910), p. 531.

<sup>31</sup> On Cusanus' legation, see Watanabe, M. "The German Church shortly before the Reformation: Nicholas Cusanus and the Veneration of the Bleeding Hosts at Wilsnack" in *Concord and Reform. Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 117–131; also Meuthen, E. "Die deutsche Legationsreise von Nikolaus von Kues" in *Lebenslehren und Weltentwürfe*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989, 421–499.

<sup>32</sup> For example in Zepperen (AC nr. 1841; re. decree of October 2, 1451), Kleve (AC nr. 2111; re. decree of December 20, 1451), and Geldern (AC nr. 2329; re. decree of March 5, 1452).

support was always cautious and their worship strictly regulated.<sup>33</sup> And despite his support of some established cooperatives, he prohibited the foundation of new lay brotherhoods in certain areas, fearing that they would supplant the function of local parishes and form divisive sects.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, one of Cusanus' main tasks during this same legation was to fight heresy and regulate worship amongst the populace. In this connection, Cusanus had 'wall catechisms'—boards with basic instructions for worship written on them in the local dialect—installed in churches,<sup>35</sup> and sought to repress superstitious beliefs and the veneration of false relics by issuing decrees, for example, forbidding pilgrimages to so-called "bleeding hosts" like those at Wilsnack.<sup>36</sup>

#### JOHN OF GELNHAUSEN AND THE ORIGIN OF THE DEBATE

These political and doctrinal motives converged in Wenck's correspondence with John of Gelnhausen († 1443). Formerly a Carthusian, he became abbot of Maulbronn in 1433/34. Both Wenck and Cusanus knew

<sup>33</sup> A good example being the "Eremitenregel" which Cusanus wrote in 1452 for Hans Franckfurter and his brother in worship, which outlined a very strict ascetic program. Whereas Wenck accused those pursuing the "abstracta vita" of wishing to avoid work, neglecting the Sacrament, and dissenting from church hierarchy, Cusanus prescribed physical labour, weekly reception of the Sacrament, and obedience to their local bishop. See *ibid.*, pp. 133–134; also *AC* nr. 1648, re: an August 24, 2451 decree imposing stricter regulations on the sisters at Zwlle.

<sup>34</sup> During his legation he issued decrees in Bamberg, Magdeburg, Minden, and Mainz forbidding the formation of new brotherhoods. In a decree of May 3, 1451 (Bamberg), he declared "Sanctorum patrum instituta nos instruunt, quid pro cultu dei cottidie agendum existat ac quod novitates, que per fraternitates fiunt, licet videantur ex quadam devocione prodire, sint potius impediende quam fovende, quoniam christiane unitati singularitates illas nequaquam convenire neque eas speratum fructum afferre experimur. Statuimus igitur, quod nulle nove fraternitates sub pretextu cuiuscumque sancti operis admittantur et iam introducte nequaquam quibuscumque favoribus, privilegiis vel indulgenciis amplius augeantur." Notably, the other part of this decree forbids the elevation of the host apart from specified feast-days, and a sermon preached on the same day concerns the viewing of holy relics—thus showing that a large part of Cusanus' concern at this time, and thus probably a significant part of his reason for banning the formation of new brotherhoods, concerned the stricter regulation of devotional practices. *AC* nr. 1264, pp. 863–864; on this ban cf. Sullivan (1996), p. 169; Vansteenberghe (1920), pp. 101–102. On Cusanus' relation to the orders in general, see Meuthen, E. *Cusanus und die Orden: aus der geistlichen Welt des späten Mittelalters*. Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> See Vansteenberghe (1920), p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> On Cusanus' unsuccessful prohibition of pilgrimages to the Bleeding Host at Wilsnack, see Sullivan, D. "The Reform of Popular Religion in the Germanies" in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*. Christianson, G. and Izbicki, T. eds. Leiden: Brill, 1996, 165–173, pp. 170–171; also Watanabe, *ibid.*, pp. 121 ff.; and Vansteenberghe (1920), pp. 98–99.

Gelnhausen from the council of Basel, where he had worked on the side of the conciliarists, fulfilling various diplomatic roles.<sup>37</sup> Already by 1438, however, he had switched to support of Eugene IV,<sup>38</sup> although he maintained friendly contact with conciliarists, as evinced by his ongoing correspondence with Johannes Wenck.<sup>39</sup> In 1442, Gelnhausen wrote Wenck a letter, asking for the latter's advice and intervention regarding his brother, Hans Franckfurter, who had recently abandoned his profession as an official of Duke Sigismund in Austria to devote himself to the hermetic life, much to Gelnhausen's dismay.<sup>40</sup> Gelnhausen feared that "Lollardian" influence had persuaded his brother to take this decision.<sup>41</sup> To his letter, Gelnhausen appended a text in which his brother had defended his decision to adopt the hermetic life. Gelnhausen appealed to Wenck as one who had already shown himself, through his preaching and teachings, to be a strong opponent of the "horrible peculiarities" (*horrendes singularitates*) of the Waldensians and Beghards.<sup>42</sup>

Gelnhausen's letter to Wenck was part of a larger exchange of letters between persons concerned with Beghardian influence, and it was not the first time Wenck's advice had been sought on the matter.<sup>43</sup> Wenck's notes indicate that he was prompted by these requests to address the 'Beghardian problem' in his sermons and lectures, and there is even indication that some sympathy for the Beguines as a legitimate movement

---

<sup>37</sup> For more on the life of John of Gelnhausen, former Abbot of Maulbronn, see Baum (1983), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> On Gelnhausen's early turn from conciliarism to papal support, see Haubst (1955), pp. 111–112 n. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Thus in his *Apologia*, Cusanus is able to hurl as a criticism against his "adversary" Wenck, that the latter's polemic, motivated by his tenacious support of conciliarism, was addressed to an Abbot (namely, Maulbronn) who had himself long ago abandoned "the condemned cause of the men of Basel", and thus that Wenck's attempt to discredit Cusanus as a papalist would have fallen on deaf ears. In *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>40</sup> Cod. Mog. 190, 149v–150v (Stadtbibliothek Mainz).

<sup>41</sup> Gelnhausen wrote in his letter to Wenck: "Vereor nequis Lolhardorum nequam considerationes fratrem meum ad vite privatatem aspirare [...]" (ibid.).

<sup>42</sup> See Haubst (1955), pp. 113–114.

<sup>43</sup> In his letter to Wenck, Gelnhausen makes reference to another letter sent by Zürich cantor Felix Hemmerlin to the bishop of Constance, Heinrich von Hewen, requesting the latter's help with the problem of the spreading Beghardian and Lollardian movement—a copy of which Wenck possessed and carefully studied. A further letter in Wenck's possession, addressed to an unnamed master who then forwarded it to Wenck, again with a request for advice, comments on the Beghard's use of Scripture to justify their movement. All of these documents are collected in the Cod. Vat. Pal. 600 according to Haubst (1955), pp. 113–114.

of church reform existed at Heidelberg University, against which Wenck struggled.<sup>44</sup>

Wenck's reply to Gelnhausen's letter opened with a list of 17 statements under the title "abgeschaiden leben" [sic] ("life of detachment") in which Wenck summarized the beliefs expressed in Franckfurter's letter.<sup>45</sup> These included the wish, as an *imitator Christi*, to divorce himself from all worldly desires; and because this is not possible *cum multitudine*, to leave society and take up a life of seclusion. The would-be hermit feels himself called upon by God to a form of worship outside of officially-sanctioned religious orders, and if others, especially *scientifici*, insult him, this only contributes to his humility and to the development of his inward life.<sup>46</sup>

In the second part of his reply, Wenck then attacks these statements.<sup>47</sup> His main emphasis is on the proper interpretation of Scripture—one which recognizes the importance of grace—and above all, the necessity of following established authorities. In this connection, he attacks the presumption of those who would trust their own opinions rather than follow the meaning of Scripture as established by the church, and whose naïve rejection of the body would entail the rejection of the Sacrament and with it all of church liturgy. Similarly, Wenck dismisses the rejection of scientific learning as simple arrogance, which presumes that not even holy teachers like St. Augustine have anything to offer him that he could not find on his own.<sup>48</sup>

Whether or not Gelnhausen passed Wenck's advice on to his brother is uncertain. However, Franckfurter was apparently initially persuaded by someone not to go into seclusion, and in 1447 he entered the monastery at Tegernsee, nevertheless, only to leave again shortly after.<sup>49</sup> On May 1, 1452 Cusanus wrote an "Eremitenregel" for Hans Franckfurter and one other

---

<sup>44</sup> Namely in the form of a lecture in Wenck's notes by an unnamed Heidelberg doctor (Cod. Mog. 190, 212r–213v), in which Beguines and those devoted to the contemplative life are depicted as legitimate representatives of church hierarchy and church reform. See Haubst (1955), p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> See Cod. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 150r–151v; or Appendix 2, below, with English translation. Haubst also edited these 17 statements in Haubst (1958), pp. 392–394.

<sup>46</sup> Cod. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 150r–151v.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 151v–154v.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Baum builds a good case that Franckfurter was persuaded by the counsel of theologian Johannes Keck—who had a much more positive attitude towards the "abstracta vita" than Wenck—to spend some 'preparatory' time in a monastery before retreating into seclusion, and that this explains the former's short stay at Tegernsee. On this and Franckfurter's subsequent activities, See Baum (1983), pp. 131–134. This 'counsel' took the form of the short work: "Responsio fr. Johannis Keck doctoris in Theologia, professi huius

brother, praising their decision to devote themselves to the hermetic life, which Franckfurter obviously chose in the end to pursue, against the wishes of his brother, but very much with the support of Cusanus.<sup>50</sup>

Not more than one-and-a-quarter-years after Gelnhausen's initial letter to Wenck, the latter was presented with a copy of *De docta ignorantia*.<sup>51</sup> His reaction was to pen the *De ignota litteratura*, no later than the summer of 1443. The text was not widely disseminated (which explains why Cusanus did not become aware of it until 1449), and was probably not intended for general publication.<sup>52</sup> Although the *Ignota* is dedicated to Gelnhausen, who seems the probable source of Wenck's receipt of *De docta*, this latter fact cannot be confirmed: Wenck makes no explicit statement regarding whence he received the text, and Cusanus, in the *Apologia*—although this may simply be polite rhetoric on his part—denies that the former abbot would ever have put his work into the hands of someone like Wenck.<sup>53</sup> It is clear from the foregoing correspondence between Wenck and Gelnhausen that the latter was particularly sensitive to the issue of heresy, especially "Lollardian" influence. Wenck therefore had reason to hope that his accusations of "Beghardian" heresy in Cusanus would have been taken seriously by the former abbot.

#### WENCK'S RESPONSE TO *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA*: THE *DE IGNOTA LITTERATURA*

The attacks made against Cusanus in *De ignota litteratura*<sup>54</sup> boil down to three fundamental criticisms, ranging from the theological to the epistemological to the purely logical. These are, respectively, that the coincidence

---

monasterii Tegernsee s. Quirini martyris, super consultatione fratris Johannis, anachoretæ eremi vallis Eni." (Tegernsee Clm. 18831, 244vb–245vb.)

<sup>50</sup> Baum (1983), p. 79, and above, n. 35.

<sup>51</sup> On the dating, see Haubst (1955), p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112, n. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Haubst asserts that, in *De ignota litteratura*, Wenck claims to have received his copy of *De docta ignorantia* from or through Maulbronn (Haubst [1955], p. 118); however the text is inconclusive on this point, as Wenck only states: "Preamande pater, visa *Docta Ignorantia* michi nuper presentata [...]". Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Manuscripts: Cod. Mog. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 134r–149r; Cod. 228/1467 8°, 307r–316v (Stadtbibliothek Trier). Edition: *Le 'de ignota litteratura' de Jean Wenck de Herenberg contre Nicolas de Cuse (BGPTM 8, 6)*. Vansteenbergh, E., ed. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1910. English translation: *Nicholas of Cusa's debate with John Wenck: a translation and an appraisal of De ignota litteratura and Apologia doctæ ignorantie*. Hopkins, J., trans. Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1981.

of everything in the divine Simplicity collapses the distinction between creature and creator, that learned ignorance disregards the fact that all human knowledge is tied to sensible images, and that the coincidence of contradictories in the Absolute violates the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction. As we shall see, however, to Wenck these three aspects are intimately interrelated—in fact inseparable. All three are touched upon in Wenck's introductory remarks, and then further developed in the body of the text in the course of a detailed analysis of statements (often paraphrases rather than quotations) from *De docta ignorantia*.

Wenck prefaces his remarks in *De ignota litteratura* with a number of biblical quotations, which to him represent the thematic core of his entire treatise. Two are particularly noteworthy, as they already reveal much about Wenck's basic orientation. He quotes Ecclesiastes 24:31: "Who elucidates me shall have eternal life",<sup>55</sup> identifying these words as God's promise to reward all "elucidators of truth" (*veritatis elucidatores*), and Psalms 45: "Be still and see that I am God".<sup>56</sup> This he maintains refers to "the legitimate enlistment of all our mental activity",<sup>57</sup> and states that the type of "seeing" intended in this passage must be distinguished from any sort of vain or curious enquiry.<sup>58</sup> This evokes Gerson's *Contra curiositatem studentium* (1402), which criticized the idle curiosity and obsession with strange and unusual teachings (*singularitates*) of both philosophers and theologians at the universities.<sup>59</sup> Like Wenck, Gerson complained about

<sup>55</sup> "Qui elucidant me vitam eternam habebunt." Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> "Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus." Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> "[...] pro legitima registracione totius nostre mentalis negociacionis". Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> "Vident et plurimi, sed non ad salutem, finem fidei nostre, sed ad curiositatem et vanitatem [...]" Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Ozment, S. ed. and trans. *Jean Gerson. Selections from A Deo exivit, Contra curiositatem studentium and De mystica theologia speculativa*. Leiden: Brill, 1969, 27–45. The criticism of "curiosity" as a vain and prideful preoccupation with the acquisition of knowledge (especially in the pursuit of logic, or dialectic) not in the service of faith, derives from Augustine, who wrote extensively about the proper teaching of the Faith and the correct attitudes of students of Scripture in *De doctrina Christiana*. For example, on "The Use of Dialectic and Rhetoric" (Book II, ch. 37), he cautions that the study of logic can make the intellect "more inclined to mischief or vanity" and sophistical argumentation. Of placing excessive value on human learning, he writes (Book II, ch. 38): "The man however who puts so high a value on these things as to be inclined to boast himself one of the learned, and who does not rather inquire after the source from which those things which he perceives to be true derive their truth [...] does not strive to make all things redound to the praise and the love of the one God from whom he knows that all things have their being; the man, I say, who acts in this way may seem to be learned, but wise in any sense he cannot be deemed" (Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Robertson, D., trans. Prentice Hall, 1958). Heiko Obermann traces the history of the medieval notion of 'curiosity' as a vice in his study, *Contra vanam curiositatem. Ein Kapitel der Theologie zwischen Seelenwinkel und*

the neglect of Sacred Scripture in favour of speculations with no basis in revealed truth. And like Wenck, Gerson emphasizes the importance of careful, scripturally-grounded elucidation of that revealed truth, quoting in this connection the same passage from Ecclesiastes.<sup>60</sup>

“Be still”, Wenck here interprets as an exhortation to a particular state of humble inward reflection which he contrasts with the inflated attitude of a scientific vision (*visio scientialis*) which would not respect its own boundaries and limitations—the latter state being an accusation directed at Cusanus. And in this respect his criticism again reflects that of Gerson: for Wenck is here advocating a humble approach to scholastic theology which eschews vain curiosities or immodest scientific aspirations rather than science itself. Having thus identified himself as a true “elucidator veritatis”, Wenck then completes his explication of this passage with a remark that encapsulates the core of his criticism of Cusanus: “...that I am God” emphasizes, according to Wenck, the absolute difference and division between divine and human nature:

Therefore, beautifully determining to be still, he adds, expositively, “and see”, attaching consequently what must be seen: “that I am God”, where “I” singularizes and patently excludes every creature from the divinity, distinguishing God from every creature, because God himself is creator, not creature.<sup>61</sup>

That Wenck feels compelled to stress this particular fact at the beginning of his treatise, as the correct interpretation of the passage which, according to him, governs his entire enterprise<sup>62</sup> reflects the first of his major criticisms of Cusanus, namely, that the coincidence of opposites

---

*Weltall*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974. Christoph Burger also discusses how concern about “curiosity” as a peculiarly scholastic sin became acute in the late Middle Ages in his essay “Theologie und Laienfrömmigkeit. Transformationsversuche im Spätmittelalter” in *Lebenslehren und Weltentwürfe im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*. Boockman, H., ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989, 400–419.

<sup>60</sup> “Nolo tamen ut haec nostra curiositatis inculpatio nutriat secordem ignaviam eorum qui de divinis ea quae possunt debentque intelligere vel negligunt vel non negligentibus detrahunt; utrumque vitio deputatur, et nolle elucidare veritatem Sacrae Scripturae cum modestia in suis se limitibus continente: ‘qui elucidant me, inquit, vitam aeternam habebunt’ (*Eccl.* 24:31); et vitium est velle plus quam oportet sapere, et non ad sobriam pietatem [...]”. Ozment, ed. and trans. (1969), pp. 42–44.

<sup>61</sup> “Pulchre ergo determinans vacare, addidit expositive ‘et videte’, attestans causaliter quid videndum: ‘quoniam ego sum Deus’, ubi ‘ego’ singularizans omnem creaturam patenter a divinitate excludit, Deum ab omni distinguens creatura, quia ipse Deus creator, non creatura.” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> “Rectificatum ergo est ex themate tantum nostre mentis negociandi exercitium Ignotae Litteraturae [...]”. Ibid.



in the divine Simplicity collapses the distinction between creature and creator. This accusation is also the doctrinal ground of his identification of Cusanus' doctrine as 'Beghardian' and its author as a 'pseudo-apostle' of the Beghards.

Wenck feels justified in making this connection immediately by virtue of Cusanus' claim, at the beginning of *De docta*, that in learned ignorance he had finally found that wisdom which he had formerly sought in various doctrinal ways (*dudum variis doctrinarum viis*) and which led him to be able to embrace "incomprehensibles incomprehensibly" (*incomprehensibilia incomprehensibiliter*).<sup>63</sup> That Cusanus had, in Wenck's opinion, abandoned traditionally-accepted doctrine and scientific method to embrace the belief that he can attain an "incomprehensible" knowledge through a "transcending of the incorruptible truths knowable to humans" (*per transcendensum veritatum incorruptibilium humanitus scibilium*)<sup>64</sup> ran completely counter to Wenck's oft-repeated insistence on the Thomistic doctrine of the necessity of sensible images for understanding.

Correspondingly, Wenck then immediately connects what he assumes to be the source of this belief to those lay religious movements he so abhors, questioning the true source of that doctrine which Cusanus claims to have received from God:

However the disciple whom Jesus loved [i.e., John] exhorts us, in his first letter, chapter 4, not to believe every spirit, but to test whether the spirits are from God, adding the reason why this is necessary: "because many pseudo-prophets have gone out into the world"; of whom the apostle, in II Corinthians 11, speaking more specifically, says: "they are pseudo-apostles, deceitful workman, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ"; among whose number is perhaps this man of learned ignorance; cunningly, under the guise of religion deceiving those who do not yet have trained senses, for out of what spirit this learned ignorance [*docta ignorantia*] proceeds, the teachings [*doctrinaciones*] of the Waldensians, Eckhartians, and Wycliffians have long shown.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> "Sed horatur nos discipulus quem diligebat Ihesus, canonica sua prima, cap. IV, non credere omni spiritui, sed probare spiritus an ex Deo sint, annectens necessitatis causam: 'quoniam multi pseudoprophete exierunt in mundum'; de quibus apostolus II<sup>a</sup> Corinth. XI subspacificancius loquens ait: 'pseudoapostoli operarii subdoli transfigurantes se in apostolos Christi'; de quorum numero forsitan extat vir iste docte ignorancie, callide sub specie religionis decipiens eos qui nondum exercitatos habent sensus, nam ex quo spiritu hec docta procedat ignorancia, dudum iam Waldensica, Eckhardica atque Wiclefica premonstraverunt doctrinaciones." Ibid., pp. 20–21.



This passage expresses Wenck's general distrust of any mystical theology which would abandon the guidance of traditional authorities to pursue independently a 'spirit', and highlights the importance of 'testing' all such claims to divinely inspired knowledge. Cusanus, Wenck believes, has not 'tested' that spirit from whom he believes he has received a gift of divine wisdom, and in this failure has not only been deceived but has himself become a wilful deceiver of others, or a pseudo-prophet, preying on the ignorance of the unlearned.<sup>66</sup>

The immediate association of Cusanus in this role with "the Waldensians, Eckhartians, and Wycliffians", prior to any identification or comparison of particular doctrines, suggests that Wenck believes himself already to have found sufficient grounds for such an identification.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, for Wenck, Cusanus' mere assertion that he had received his doctrine in an unmediated and personal manner from God already meant that he, like these lay devotional sects, had abandoned the system of authority which safeguarded against the influence of 'false spirits'. It also hearkens back to Wenck's correspondence with Gelnhausen, and Franckfurter's assertion that he felt himself called upon by God to pursue the contemplative life outside of officially-sanctioned orders. The writings of Cusanus, Wenck thought, were another example of how one can be carried away and misled by a spirit in the absence of good counsel from those learned enough to 'test' such experiences of personal inspiration. Therefore, when Wenck writes that the "spirit" which inspired learned ignorance in Cusanus is the same as that which had inspired the "Waldensians, Eckhartians, and

---

<sup>66</sup> This was a concern also expressed by others in the late Middle Ages in relation to the practice of mystical theology. For example, the Carthusian Peter of Leyden, in his *Libellus introductorius* (printed at Köln in 1527 and 1532)—a handbook on mystical theology aimed at unlearned readers—stressed that scholastic theology is important for mystical theology because it helps to protect the uneducated by revealing the truth of Scripture and the teachings of the doctors, so that readers do not mistakenly assume they have been inspired by the Holy Spirit when in fact they are only dwelling on figments of their own imaginations. See Hoenen, M. "Translating Mystical Texts from the Vernacular into Latin. The Intentions and Strategies behind Laurentius Surius' Edition of John of Ruusbroec's Complete Works (Cologne 1552)" in Beccarisi, A., et al., eds., *Per Perscrutationem philosophicam. Neue Perspektiven der mittelalterlichen Forschung*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008, 348–374, p. 371, n. 82.

<sup>67</sup> Wenck does not discriminate between any of the aforementioned lay devotional movements, as in his view "Lollard", "Waldensian", "Wyclifite", and "Beghard" all indicate essentially the same error or set of errors. In fact, "Waldensians" and "Wiclifites" are mentioned only once, in the above-quoted passage; later on in the text, he refers interchangeably to the "Lollards of Strasbourg" and the "Beghards of Strasbourg". Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), pp. 29–30.

Wycliffians”, he is insinuating that learned ignorance is a heretical doctrine which should, like those of the aforementioned groups, be condemned, since the “spirit” from which these doctrines proceeded was not truly from God, but was the work of men, who, in professing it to be from God, made themselves into “pseudo-apostles”.

The work of such “spirits” (i.e., any knowledge claimed to have been received through divine or “angelic” inspiration) must, according to Wenck, be rejected unless it can be shown to be in conformity with Scripture.<sup>68</sup> Now, Scripture, Wenck continues—coming to the epistemological aspect of his criticism—tells us that we can only know what is knowable, and that things are knowable only *per speculum et enigmatē*—which, on Wenck’s interpretation, means symbolically and through images.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, when held up to the “test” of sacred Scripture, it is already patent that no one can know anything “incomprehensible” or in an “incomprehensible” way. Thus Cusanus is implicitly accused of not knowing Scripture, or at least of not heeding its authority, and certainly of failing to test his own personal “spirit” against it as he should have, which resulted in his making this foolish error.

However, neglect of Scripture is not Cusanus’ only failing, according to Wenck, as these same epistemological requirements are confirmed by the philosophers:

For in this life, where according to Boethius “everything which is received is received according to the mode of the receiver”, it is impossible for man to comprehend other than comprehensibly and in images [*ymagines*]; since, as in *De anima* III, the image [*fantasma*] is to the intellect what colour is to vision. It is however evident that without the objectively actuating light of colour, vision cannot see anything. Therefore neither does it happen that we understand without an image [*fantasma*]. Accordingly Holy Scripture has transmitted to us in symbols that which is divinely inspired and revealed, in conformity with the usual manner of our natural conceptions.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> “Tubemur a Salvatore; Marci primo, evangelio credere, quoniam est Dei sermo indissolubilis, Joh. X: ‘non potest solvi scriptura’, cuius assertio ab apostolo preponitur angelico evangelio, ad Galat. I: ‘licet nos aut angelus de celo evangelizet vobis preterquam quod evangelizavimus vobis, anathema sit’”. Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> “Dicit autem evangelium, prima Corinth. XIII, nos intelligere per speculum et enigmatē.” Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Repugnat namque in hac vita, ubi secundum Boecium ‘omne quod recipitur recipitur secundum modum recipientis’, aliter hominem comprehendere quam comprehensibiliter et in ymagine, cum ex 3<sup>o</sup> *De Anima* hoc sit fantasma ad intellectum quod est color ad visum, constat autem sine lumine coloris actuante obiectaliter visum nichil posse videre, ergo nec sine fantasmate contingit nos intelligere. Quapropter scriptura sancta in

Scripture is not only the authority and revealed truth, but has furthermore transmitted this truth in a manner conforming to human understanding. And because it is so conformed, the statements of the philosophers about the nature of the human understanding may help us better to understand the contents of Scripture. Thus, according to Wenck, in claiming to have grasped “incomprehensibles, incomprehensively”, Cusanus demonstrates his ignorance of philosophy.

As mentioned above, Wenck’s insistence on the necessity of sensible images or *fantasmata* for knowledge reflects his Thomism. His emphasis on the conformity of revealed truth with human understanding, and on the compatibility of revealed Truth with philosophy also reflects more broadly his adherence to the *via antiqua*. According to adherents of this way (who were known also as *reales*), the study of philosophy complements study of Scripture because Scripture, although revealed, was revealed in a manner conforming to the *ratio* of human understanding and hence in accordance with the dictates of logic, as expounded by Aristotle and his commentators.<sup>71</sup> Now, Cusanus, having worked outside of the academic milieu, had no doctrinal affiliation with any of the late-medieval schools; all the same, it is certain that he was no nominalist (and in fact he defended a distinctly realist, and even Thomistic view of universals)<sup>72</sup> and that he would not dispute, in general, the assertion that man understands only through images. However, as far as Wenck is concerned, Cusanus has failed to see that it is only possible to receive in the mode of the receiver—i.e., to comprehend things rationally and through *fantasmata*.

Wenck furthermore dismisses Cusanus’ assertion that in embracing incomprehensibles incomprehensibly the human intellect is elevated to a simplicity wherein all contradictories coincide as a cynical attempt to

---

simbolis nobis tradidit divinitus inspirata ac revelata pariformiter ad consuetudinem naturalis nostre conceptionis.” Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> In the Middle Ages the study of philosophy at the universities was primarily the study of the Aristotelian tradition, comprising the works of Aristotle and his ancient as well as medieval commentators. On the Aristotelian tradition at medieval universities, see Hoenen, M. Article “Universities and Philosophy” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Lagerlund, H., ed. Heidelberg: Springer, 2010, Part 21, 1359–1364. On the respective claims of *antiqui* and *moderni*, see Hoenen (2003), pp. 15–16.

<sup>72</sup> This will be discussed below, see section “*On the unity of the intellectual tradition*”. The position that Cusanus was not a nominalist is also supported by Roth: “Gerade die göttliche Offenbarung führt die natürliche Vernunft bei Occam in die Krise. Cusanus will dagegen zeigen, wie beides sich nicht nur in Harmonie befindet, sondern bis zur Ununterscheidbarkeit zusammenkommt. Das bedeutet natürlich auch, daß er Vernunft und Glaube anders zu denken hat” (Roth [2000], p. 62).

preclude all possible counterargument; for in such a case, he argues, no inference could be established that might be refuted.<sup>73</sup> Failing to see that God can “coincide” with no creature, Cusanus uses the notion of divine simplicity to claim the possibility of a direct, non-symbolic knowledge of the divine which would collapse the distinction between creator and created, as well as undermine the rationality of revealed truth. Insofar as Wenck views Cusanus to be asserting that the revealed truth is not “comprehensible” in the normal manner, but only paradoxically comprehensible in some non-comprehensible, and therefore irrational way, he sees him as attacking the authority and sanctity of Revelation itself; for in making it thus inaccessible to human reason, it would be rendered vulnerable to numerous attacks—and accordingly, he then refers to the danger to the Faith presented by this doctrine:

What then would become of the inferences of our savior’s prophets, evangelists and apostles, by which our faith is seen to be in no small measure confirmed against the infidels?<sup>74</sup>

If not able to defend the rationality of the statements in Scripture on the basis of their compatibility with logic and the statements of the philosophers, the Faith would be left open to the ridicule of the infidel, who would not accept its truth as revealed, but might be persuaded through rational arguments to accept it.<sup>75</sup> This ability to defend the rationality of the Faith to non-believers was one of the principle arguments brought forth by followers of the *via antiqua* in defence of an approach to theology that adhered closely to the philosophy of Aristotle.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> “Verum hic scriba docte ignorancie, ut omnem evadat argumentorum impugnationem, hanc dat cautelam ut in huiusmodi profundis incomprehensibilibus incomprehensibiliter amplectendis omnis nostri humani ingenii conatus se ad illam eleve simpliciter, ubi contradictoria coincidunt, in quo dicit laborare primi sui libelli conceptum; quam simplicitatem dicit Deum, non videns illud quod in themate premissum est: ‘quoniam ego sum Deus’, cum quo nichil creature coincidit, aut ex rei natura commiscetur. Et si prefatus magister docte ignorancie omnem sic prevenire vult oppositionem, tunc nulla erit ibidem contradiccio; et quis eum redarguet, cum tum nulla possit fundari consequencia, deficiente repugnancia oppositi consequentis ad antecedens.” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 21.

<sup>74</sup> “Ubi tunc erunt consequencie prophetarum salvatoris, evangelistarum ac apostolorum, quibus dinoscitur fides non modicum roborata contra perfidos?” Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> This, interestingly, is an argument not infrequently brought forward by Cusanus himself in his treatises, as for example both *De Deo abscondito* and *De pace fidei* are based on the premise that the reasonableness of the Faith can be demonstrated to non-believers through (conventional) logical argumentation.

<sup>76</sup> *Antiqui* maintained that the philosophy of Aristotle was compatible with the Faith. Thomist Lambert de Monte (rector of the *Bursa Montana* at Köln from 1480–1499) even

Wenck would furthermore have regarded Cusanus' "unlearned" doctrine as opening the door to all manner of unorthodoxy; for, in his view, anyone could use it to assert so-called divine truths, claiming to have attained them "incomprehensibly" through the intervention of some kind of "spirit"—thereby leading to such "horrendous peculiarities" as those expressed by the Beghards and Waldensians. Wenck perceived in the very suggestion of a "learned ignorance" in which comprehensibles are somehow "incomprehensibly" grasped, a threat to the Church's ability to regulate belief within the Faith.

The last point Wenck makes in his introduction to *De ignota litteratura* is specifically the way in which Cusanus' assertion of the coincidence of opposites undermines the fundamental principle of logic—and therefore of all reason—which Aristotle teaches us in *Metaphysics* IV, namely, that it is impossible both to be and not to be the same thing simultaneously and in the same respect.<sup>77</sup> This is mentioned not in defence of philosophy as such, but in immediate connection to his remarks about the necessity of being able to argue the rationality of the faith against infidels. Wenck will devote much of the following exposition to demonstrating in detail how Cusanus violates Aristotelian principles and how the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites destroys Aristotle's entire doctrine.<sup>78</sup> His contention in this respect will be that Cusanus' errors result from his lack of education in logic, with the aid of which he surely could not have come to such

---

went so far as to argue for the canonization of the heathen Philosopher on this basis. See Senger, H. "Was geht Lambert von Heerenberg die Seeligkeit des Aristoteles an?" in *MM* 15. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1982, 293–311. On the agreement between Aristotle and the Faith, Lambert wrote: "Aristoteles in nullo doctrine aut legi Christi contrariatur, immo est ei per omnia conformis. Et ideo sancta Romana ecclesia et sancti patres instituerunt studia universalis philosophiae in quibus studijs luce clarius apparet omnia studia christianorum in philosophia eligere doctrinam Aristotelis tanquam conformem sacre scripture ac dictis sanctorum." Lambert de Monte (von Heerenberg). *Quaestio magistralis ostendens quid dici possit de salvatione Aristotelis* (Ed. Köln, 1498, f. Bi<sup>rb</sup>, 56–62). Also, in the late-15th century records of the University of Ingolstadt, we find the statement that the doctrines of the *antiqui*, or *reales*, in conforming more closely to the writings of Aristotle than those of the *moderni*, are therefore closer to the Faith: "[...] doctrina Realium conformior est doctrine fidei et sacre scripture quam doctrina aliorum; que magis nitiatur doctrina Aristotelis [...]." "Anhang von Aktenstücken" in Ehrle (1925), p. 338.

<sup>77</sup> "Affert eciam de medio talismodi eius assercio semen omnis doctrine, videlicet illud: Idem esse et non esse impossibile, IV<sup>o</sup> *Metaphysicorum*." Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), pp. 21–22.

<sup>78</sup> For example, regarding the assertion that all contradictories coincide in the unqualifiedly Maximum, Wenck writes: "O quantum spargitur hic venenum erroris et perfidie, corollario isto destruente omnem processum scientificum ac omnem consequentiam, pariter et tollente omnem oppositionem, pariter et legem contradictionis, et per consequens totam doctrinam Aristotelis, destructo semine omnis doctrine [...]." *Ibid.*, p. 29.

conclusions.<sup>79</sup> Wenck's attack is thus wholly directed from the perspective of a defence of Aristotelian philosophy as this was used in support of theology in the universities and of which, as a Thomist, Wenck was a particularly close adherent. This defence is, as said, in turn a defence of religious orthodoxy, insofar as Wenck believed that only a philosophically-grounded rational theology could defend the Faith.

The body of Wenck's treatise is comprised of a list of "conclusiones" and "correlarii", in which he summarizes what he feels to be the key points of *De docta ignorantia*, and then responds to each in turn. This rather academic format is of course of Wenck's making, as *De docta ignorantia* itself has no such divisions, and recalls the similar way in which he divided the points made in Franckfurter's letter into 17 "proposiciones". His selection of conclusions reflects and expands upon those points already touched upon in the introduction, and may be clearly divided into two main targets: passages where Cusanus expresses what Wenck considers to be heretical statements of Eckhardian/Beghardian origin; and passages where Cusanus makes statements which violate principles of Aristotelian philosophy. As these give a more precise picture of the true nature and intention of *De ignota litteratura*, it will be worthwhile briefly to examine each in turn. The former are largely concentrated in the "prima conclusio", which articulates what Wenck feels to be the fundamental error shared by Cusanus, Eckhart, and the latter's Beghardian followers. Wenck's attacks on Cusanus *via* Aristotle are more numerous and extensive; however, as all of these come back in one way or another to the violation of the principle of non-contradiction already alluded to in his introduction, there is no need to examine each in detail, and we will just look at two key passages which encapsulate the core of his objections. Finally we will return to the broader significance of these two vectors of criticism and how they converge in a single concern for the defence of the Faith.

#### *Eckhardian/Beghardian "heresy" in De docta ignorantia*

Wenck has in his foregoing remarks already established that Cusanus, due to his lack of instruction in philosophy and neglect of Scripture, made the erroneous assumption that it is possible for the intellect to leave behind

---

<sup>79</sup> "Ad hunc tamen errorem eum *paucitas instruccionis logice* induxit, qua putavit in sua ignorancia adequatam et precisam ad Deum proporcionem tanquam medium Deum venandi et noscendi se recipisse." [my italics] Ibid., p. 24.

sensible things and to “incomprehensibly ascend to an incomprehensible truth”.<sup>80</sup> Thus he left behind “the beauty and comeliness of creatures” to vanish into the “darkness” of his own abstractions, an error he moreover identifies as “unbelieving and most impious”. Whilst wandering about in the darkness of his own impious ignorance, according to Wenck, Cusanus stumbled upon the conclusion that the simplicity of the divine nature means that “all things coincide with God”:

First conclusion: Everything coincides with God. This is clear because He is the absolute maximum, not admitting of greater and lesser; therefore nothing is opposed to him and as a consequence, because lacking division, as Hermes Trismegistus says, he is the totality of things, and as a further consequence no name can properly pertain to him, due to the absence of a discrete imposition, since the imposition of a name is from the determined quality of that to which the name is imposed.<sup>81</sup>

The above “conclusio” is a loose paraphrase of remarks made by Cusanus in chapters 5 and 24 of Book I of *De docta ignorantia*. That Wenck brings together elements so widely separated in the source text and asserts them moreover as its “prima conclusio”, reveals something of his agenda, and the juxtaposition of this *conclusio* with lengthy citations from Meister Eckhart leaves no doubt as to what that is: he has selected these particular statements from *De docta ignorantia* because they appear to express “Eckhardian” notions.

Wenck then asserts that the content of this “prima conclusio” is alluded to by Eckhart in his “Book of Comfort”,<sup>82</sup> where it is written that a man should endeavour to divest himself of all creaturely images, striving to know God alone. In such a state, there will be nothing in creation that can affect him, for he will be, with the whole of his being, “from God, in

---

<sup>80</sup> “Sic ergo scriba docte ignorancie, intrans caliginem tenebrarum linquens omnem speciem et decorem creaturarum, evanescit in cogitationibus, et non valens Deum intueri sicuti est, quia adhuc viator, ipsum nequaquam glorificat, sed in tenebras suas errans, culmen divine laudis ad quod omnis psalmodia perducitur derelinquit et postponit, quod fore nephandissimum et incredulum quis fidelium ignorat. Ad hunc tamen errorem eum paucitas instructionis logice induxit [...]” Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> “Prima conclusio: Omnia cum Deo coincidunt. Patet, quia est maximum absolutum, non admittens excedens et excessum, ergo nichil sibi oppositum, et per consequens, ob defectum discrecionis, ut ayt Hermes Trismegistus, ipse est universitas rerum, et per consequens eciam nullum nomen ei proprie potest convenire, ob defectum discretive inposicionis, cum inposicio nominis sit a determinata qualitate eius cui nomen inponitur.” Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Meister Eckhart. *Das Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*. Kurt Flasch, trans. München: Beck, 2007. The contents of this work were among those mobilized against Eckhart during the inquisition proceedings against him at Köln. Enders (2008), p. 33.



God, and God”.<sup>83</sup> Also in his sermons, Wenck writes, Eckhart speaks of a “citadel” within the human soul which is so simple that even God could not perceive in it measure or personal properties, and which, if it were to view God, would see that He is also beyond all names and properties, and in this way neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit. And God may moreover enter into this most deiform “citadel” in the soul.<sup>84</sup> Now, while there are certainly similarities between the statements in these respective passages from Eckhart and Cusanus, what Wenck quotes from Eckhart expresses considerably more than what is stated in the “prima conclusio”. Nevertheless, Wenck blatantly conflates the two in his next sentence, writing: “See how many evils abound and teem in such most simple learned ignorance and most abstract understanding”<sup>85</sup>—speaking of the statements from

---

<sup>83</sup> “Huic conclusioni alludit magister Eghardus in libro suo vulgari quem edidit pro regina Ungarie sorore ducum Austrie, quod incipit: ‘Benedictus Deus et pater Domini nostri Ihesu Christi’, dicens: ‘Homo deberet esse multum diligens ut spoliaret et denudaret se ipsum a propria ymagine et cuiuscumque creature, et ignoraret patrem nisi solum Deum; tunc nichil est quod possit eum contristare vel conturbare, nec Deus, nec creatura, nec aliquid creatum, nec aliquid increatum: totum suum esse, vivere et nosse, scire, amare est ex Deo, in Deo et Deus.’” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> “Et idem in sermonibus suis: ‘In anima est quoddam castellum quod interdum vocavi custodiam anime, quandoque scintillam, et valde simplex sicut Deus est unus et simplex. Ita simplex est et similiter omnem modum, quod Deus non potest intueri secundum modum et proprietates personales; et si intueretur ipsum, hoc constaret eum omnia sua nomina divina et suas proprietates personales (amisisse?) eo quod ipse est sine modo et proprietate, sed secundum quod quod ipse Deus est unus et simplex et sine modo et proprietate, secundum quod nec est Pater, nec Filius, nec Spiritus Sanctus, sic potest ipse intrare in illud unum quod voco castellum.’” Ibid., pp. 24–25. The text referred to is Predigt 2 of Eckhart’s German sermons, “Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum” (See *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen Werke*, Bd 1, Predigten: 1. Quint, J., ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958. Section 5, pp. 24–45). The “citadel” is a metaphor for the absolutely One, which, to Eckhart, precedes even the distinction of the holy Persons. Wenck’s description of this passage is somewhat inaccurate. In fact, what Eckhart writes is that even God could not perceive this “citadel” except as absolute Oneness, divested of any and every characteristic, and thus not as Father or Son or Holy Spirit: “[...] so rehte ein und einvaltic ist diz bürgelin, und so enbobaen alle wise uns alle krefte ist diz einic ein, daz im niemer kraft noch wise zuo geluogen mac noch got selber. [...] Got selber luoget da niemer in einen ougenblick und geluogete noch nie dar in, als verre als er sich habende ist nach wise und uf eigenschaft siner personen. [...] Und dar umbe: sol got iemer dar in geluogen, ez muoz in kosten alle sine götliche namen und sine personliche eigenschaft [...]” (ibid., pp. 42–43). Eckhart indeed further asserts that there is such a “citadel” in the human soul, by which he however means specifically that neither the Father, the Son, nor the Holy Spirit reside in the soul, but only God in this most abstract and universal sense (which is merely a logical consequence of God being absolutely One)—a distinction which is lost on Wenck.

<sup>85</sup> “Aspice quanta mala in huiusmodi docta ignorancia simplicissima atque abstractissima intelligencia scaturiunt et ebulliunt [...]” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 25.



Eckhart as though they were themselves *examples* of Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, what Wenck sees in *De docta ignorantia* is something not at all new, but, in his mind, part of a pre-existing tradition established by Eckhart. Thus he tends to pick out the parts of Cusanus' text which seem to confirm this view. In this way, Wenck is able, without examining these statements in the context of the arguments to which they belong, to incriminate them through their mere association with those of an already condemned author. In this connection, he then makes the further association with the Beghards and Beguines of Strasbourg, who were put on trial by their bishop in 1317 for maintaining this very doctrine, namely, that God is formally everything that is, and that they were one with God by nature and without distinction.<sup>87</sup> These assertions (shared by Eckhart, the Beghards, and Cusanus, according to Wenck), both collapse the distinction between God and creation and destroy the Trinity, insofar as there could be no distinction of the holy Persons.<sup>88</sup> The latter consequence is, he writes, not only "patently opposed to the orthodox faith" but also contradicts Cusanus's own attempt later in *De docta ignorantia* to argue for the Trinity, since he has precluded the possibility of making distinctions in the divine nature.<sup>89</sup>

Wenck's conflation of learned ignorance with Beghardian doctrines becomes most explicit at the end of the second corollary to the fourth

---

<sup>86</sup> This is actually the second application of this strategy, as Wenck made the same move when he implied that the "Waldensians, Eckhardians, and Wycliffians" also propounded a doctrine of "learned ignorance". Ibid., p. 21: "[...] nam ex quo spiritu hec docta procedat ignorantia, dudum iam Waldensica, Eckhardica atque Wiclefica premonstraverunt doctrinationes." See also above, n. 67, for fuller citation.

<sup>87</sup> "[...] unde Iohannes episcopus Argentinensis, anno D<sup>ni</sup> 1317, sabbato ante festum Assumpcionis Beate Marie Virginis, dedit processum contra Beghardos et sorores in sua civitate, dicentes Deum esse formaliter omne quod est, et se esse Deum per naturam sine distinctione." Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>89</sup> "Nec valet probacio conclusionis adducte, quia illa cum conclusione tolleret penitus benedictam Trinitatem, ex quo in illo maximo absolute quod Deus est, secundum ipsum scribam docte ignorancie, nulla est discrecio nec relationis opposicio, et sic persone in divinis proprietatibus non different, et per consequens in hac docta ignorantia nedum divinarum personarum esset confusio, sed etiam universitatis rerum cum Deo esset essentialis unio; quod nedum constat esse contra fidem orthodoxam, verum etiam contra semetipsum, qui postea in suo libro benedictam Trinitatem nititur similitudinibus astruere, quas tamen suo docta ignorantia prescidit et reliquit. Et si sic est universorum precisio a Deo ut ipse asserit in aspectu simplicissime entitatis omnium doctissime ignorancie, quomodo in hac prima conclusione connectit Deo omnia coincidunter?" Ibid.

conclusion, where he openly identifies the term “abgeschieden Leben” as the vernacular equivalent of the term “docta ignorancia”:

... that most abstract intelligence, known as learned ignorance [*docta ignorancia*], in the vernacular: ‘the detached life’ ...<sup>90</sup>

Although this association is unfounded, Wenck indeed had good reason to tie Eckhart to Begardianism, as he was closely associated with Beguine sisterhoods, especially during his Strasbourg period.<sup>91</sup>

Returning to the *prima conclusio*, Wenck has further Eckhardian connections to make:

The first corollary of this first conclusion: By means of Absolute maximality all things are that which they are, because that by which they are is Absolute being, without which nothing can be.<sup>92</sup>

This corollary, taken from *De docta*, Book I, ch. 2,<sup>93</sup> is also an Eckhardian doctrine, according to Wenck, found in the latter’s commentary on Genesis, where he states that being is God, “because if it were other than God: either God would not be, or else, if he were, he would be from something other than himself.”<sup>94</sup> To this he appends a lengthy quote describing the temporal manner of God’s act of creation: how God created heaven and earth in the simple “now” of eternity, the same “now” in which the Trinity of persons eternally emanates. Thus God could not have created the world earlier, since for him there was no “earlier” in which he could have acted.<sup>95</sup> Not only does the above corollary not speak of such matters, but nowhere in *De docta ignorantia* does Cusanus speak of the creation of the

<sup>90</sup> “[...] abstractissima illa intelligencia, nuncupata *docta ignorancia*, vulgariter: ‘*abgeschaiden leben*’ [sic] [...]” Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> On this, see Enders (2008), pp. 30ff.

<sup>92</sup> “Corollarium primum huius prime conclusionis: Maximitate absoluta omnia sunt id quod sunt, eo quod illa est entitas absoluta sine qua nichil esse nequit.” Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> “[...] sicut absoluta maximitas est entitas absoluta, per quam omnia id sunt, quod sunt, ita et universalis unitas essendi ab illa, quae maximum dicitur ab absolute [...]” h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. I, ch. 2, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> “Huic alludit Eghardus in scripto suo super Genesim et Exodum: ‘Esse est Deus, quia si esset aliud ab ipso Deo, Deus non esset, aut si esset, alio utique esset’ [...]” Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 26.

<sup>95</sup> “[...] et subdit: ‘Principium in quo creavit Deus celum et terram est primum nunc simplex eternitatis, ipsum inquam idem nunc penitus in quo Deus est ab eterno, in quo eciam est, fuit et erit eternaliter personarum emanatio. Unde cum quereretur a me aliquando quare Deus mundum non creasset prius, respondi: quia non potuit, eo quod non esset nec fuerat prius antequam esset mundus; quomodo poterat creare prius, cum in eodem nunc mox mundum creavit in quo fuit Deus?’” Ibid.

world in this way. Wenck however likely includes it because he regards it as an unavoidable consequence of the coincidence of being with Absolute being, or the Absolute maximum. In this respect, it ought also to be noted that the above corollary does not assert, as does the respective Eckhart quotation, that the Absolute maximum *is* creation, but merely that all things are *through* or *by means of* the Absolute maximum (by use of the ablative)—a distinction which Wenck here overlooks.

The above corollary, Wenck then asserts, goes counter to Scripture, which tells us both that God's power belongs to him alone, and that before him nothing had existed.<sup>96</sup> It furthermore "would destroy the subsistence of things within their own genus",<sup>97</sup> which, as Scripture once again tells us, is sustained only by the power of God.<sup>98</sup> As things could not be sustained by God unless different from him, it is clear that creation is distinct from its creator. Notable in these passages is the way Scripture is brought forward to refute Cusanus—not however, dogmatically, but rather in the manner of what Wenck will a little later in the treatise call "the true mode of theologizing" (*verus modus theologizandi*),<sup>99</sup> as expressing a truth in conformity with human reason. Cusanus has thus again failed to heed Scripture, which prevented him from being able to reason correctly about the divine nature.

Two further statements are identified by Wenck as professing condemned Eckhardian/Beghardian views, namely, the second corollary of the third *conclusio* and the fourth conclusion, both of which are essentially reiterations of the oneness of God and creation. The former states that the Absolute maximum both is and is not everything that it is conceived to be, and that it is at once all things and no thing.<sup>100</sup> The first assertion, Wenck claims, surely destroys God's very existence, for insofar

---

<sup>96</sup> "Attendant hi errantes illud Sap. XI: 'Omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti. Multum enim valere tibi soli supererat semper; et virtuti brachii tui quis resistet? Quoniam tanquam momentum statere, sic ante te est orbis terrarum, et tanquam gutta roris antelucani [...] que descendit in terram.'" Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> "Auferret ergo hoc corollarium subsistencias rerum in proprio genere [...]." Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> "[...] que virtute Dei ne in nichilum fluant manuteneantur, dicente apostolo Hebr. primo: 'Omnia portans verbo virtutis sue'; et si manuteneantur a Deo, tunc utique non sunt Deus, maximitas scilicet absoluta, sed sunt aliud et non nichil, et distincta a Deo eorum creatore." Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>100</sup> "Corollarium secundum eiusdem conclusionis III<sup>e</sup>: 'Omne quod concipitur esse non magis est quam non est'. Patet, quia maximum absolutum ita est hoc quod est omnia, quod est et nullum." Ibid., p. 29. This corollary seems to have been derived from *De docta*, Book I, ch. 4, where Cusanus writes: "Quia igitur maximum absolute est omnia absolute actu, quae esse possunt [...]. Et omne id, quod concipitur esse, non magis est quam non est; et omne

as he is conceived, he would both be and not be; and the second, in saying that he is all things, teaches that God is a creature. This, Wenck takes once more as indication that Cusanus has failed to understand Scripture, in particular when it is said “Be still and see *that I am God*”, and in this failing is again likened to the Beghards:

Accordingly, this teacher of learned ignorance fails to be still and [...] to see what God says, namely, “that I am God”. On the contrary, he is more foolish than formerly were the Beghards of Strasbourg, who were condemned by their bishop. They used to say that they were God through nature without distinction, that all the divine perfections were in them, and that they were eternal and in eternity. They also used to affirm that they had created all things and more than God and that they needed no one, neither God nor any deity, saying: “If you wish to worship God, worship me.”<sup>101</sup>

While these statements do conform to the list of condemned articles attributed to the Beghards in the aforementioned condemnation,<sup>102</sup> they can hardly be said to exist anywhere in *De docta ignorantia*, let alone in the above corollary. Thus we see Wenck here very freely associating Cusanus with a whole raft of condemned doctrines on the presumed basis that they follow from the assertion that God both is and is not everything that is and is conceived.

The fourth conclusion essentially concerns Cusanus’ assertion, according to Wenck, that the images through which we symbolically investigate spiritual matters are of one nature with their original.<sup>103</sup> However, Wenck’s articulation of this part of the conclusion, taken from Book I, Ch. 11 of *De docta*, is very distorted. What Cusanus actually wrote is that *only* the maximal image, i.e., Christ, is one in nature with the exemplar.<sup>104</sup> Rather than asserting the oneness of an image and its exemplar, as Wenck accuses, Cusanus is actually here at pains to point out their difference. This case

---

id, quod concipitur non esse, non magis non est quam est. Sed ita hoc, quod est omnia, et ita omnia, quod est nullum [...]” h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk I, ch. 4, pp. 10–11.

<sup>101</sup> “[...] ymmo plus desipit olim Beghardis Argentinensibus per eorum episcopum dampnatis, qui dicebant se esse Deum per naturam sine distinctione, et quod in eis essent omnes perfectiones divine, et essent eterni et in eternitate; qui et dicebant se omnia creasse et plus quam Deus, et nullo indigere, nec Deo nec deitate, dicentes: ‘si vis adorare Deum, adora me.’” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), pp. 29–30.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Döllinger (1890), pp. 389–394.

<sup>103</sup> “Quod spiritualia [...] symbolice investigentur [...] cum similitudo exemplaris sit hoc ipsum quod exemplar in unitate nature.” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 30.

<sup>104</sup> “Et quamvis omnis imago accedere videatur ad similitudinem exemplaris: tamen praeter maximam imaginem, quae est hoc ipsum quod exemplar in unitate naturae, non est imago adeo similis aut aequalis exemplari, quin per infinitum similior et aequalior esse possit [...]” h *De docta ignorantia*. Bk I, ch. 11, p. 22.

is however typical of Wenck's analysis in *De ignota*, which almost always overlooks the subtle distinctions Cusanus seeks to make in order to render them into heretical statements.

As a Thomist, Wenck finds the assertion in the fourth conclusion, which appears to confuse images (which are by nature merely analogous) with their exemplar, particularly egregious. As such, this conclusion provokes his ire, and he writes:

O how great a weakness of intellect is it to assert that all things are one and that all things are essentially divine, and not to be able to distinguish an image from the original of which it is the image! Indeed, since the image is an approximate likeness of the original and does not come close to being an identity: it is not the same, in oneness of nature, as the original. Thus the Lollards of Strasbourg, who were condemned, used to say that a man can be united to God in such a way that his ability both to will and to do everything is the same as God's. Indeed Eckhart says in his sermons: "The Father begets his Son in me"; and "I am there that same Son, not an other Son". All these teachings are so to be abominated that a faithful intellect will shun dealing with them except for defending its professed faith.<sup>105</sup>

Once again the attribution to Cusanus of a particular assertion is immediately related to condemned doctrines and statements which go far beyond anything stated in the actual *conclusio* under discussion. There is no sentence in *De docta ignorantia* which either states or implies, for example, that a man can be so united to God that his willing and doing are the same. However, Wenck clearly identifies Cusanus' statements about images here with the image-theory of Eckhart. In a sermon from his Strasbourg period, Eckhart wrote of images:

An image is not from itself, nor is it for itself, but stems rather from that of which it is an image, and belongs to it with everything that it is. What is foreign to that of which it is an image, does not belong to it, nor does it stem from that. An image takes its being unqualifiedly alone from that of which it is an image, and has one being with it and is the same being.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> "O quanta infirmitas intellectus, omnia asserere unum esse, et omnia essentialiter deificari, nec ymaginem posse distinguere a suo exemplari! Cum enim ymago ad similitudinem accedit sui exemplaris, non ad ydemptitatem, tunc non est hoc ipsum quod est exemplar in unitate nature. Sic dicebant Lolhardi Argentinenses dampnati, quod homo possit sic uniri Deo quod ipsius sit idem posse et velle et operari quodcumque quod est ipsius Dei. Ymmo Eghardus in sermonibus suis ait: 'Pater generat filium suum in me, et ego sum ibi ille idem filius, non alius.' Que omnia tam abhominanda sunt, quod ea refugit fidelis intellectus tractare nisi in defensionem fidei professe." Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 30.

<sup>106</sup> Quint, J., ed. *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen Werke*, Bd 1, Predigten: 1. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958, p. 270, 2–6: "Ein Bild ist nicht aus sich selbst, noch ist es für sich selbst, es stammt vielmehr von dem, dessen Bild es ist, und gehört ihm mit allem, was es ist, zu. Was

This apparent identification of image and exemplar—in that an image “has the same being” as its exemplar—had heretical implications to Wenck, as it seemed to equate the being of the divine and the human mind. He saw it as running counter to conventional Aristotelian theory, in which the very definition of analogy rests upon the distinction between image and exemplar—not to mention defying simple common sense, Wenck asserts, since an image can be an image only by virtue of this distinction. Thus he decries the sheer stupidity of anyone who would assert such a theory as described in the fourth *conclusio*, and uses association with the image-theory of the condemned Eckhart to incriminate Cusanus’ doctrine of learned ignorance.

Of course, Wenck’s interpretation of Eckhart’s image-theory is similarly misguided, as Eckhart’s intention was not to equate image and exemplar, or creature and creator, but rather to underline the total dependence of the former upon the latter by insisting that an image, by definition, has no independent (i.e., non-accidental) being.<sup>107</sup> This he expressed more clearly in the *Parisian Questions*, where he explains, with reference to Aristotle, that all accidental being is not real being insofar as its cause lies outside of it:

There it is also said [i.e., in *Met.* VI] that truth, which is in the mind, is not a being, because it has no cause [...]. Hence, a being existing in the mind, as it exists in the mind, does not have the nature of being; as such, it inclines to the opposite of existence. An image, as such, is also not a being: the more we think about its entity the more it distracts us from knowing the thing whose image it is.<sup>108</sup>

---

dem, dessen Bild es ist, fremd ist, dem gehört es nicht zu, noch stammt es von ihm. Ein Bild nimmt sein Sein ohne Vermittelndes allein von dem, dessen Bild es ist, und hat ein Sein mit ihm und ist dasselbe Sein.”

<sup>107</sup> Studies of Eckhart’s image-theory may be found in Enders (2008), esp. pp. 34ff; also in Flasch, K. “*Procedere ut imago*. Das Hervorgehen des Intellekts aus seinem göttlichen Grund bei Meister Dietrich, Meister Eckhart und Berthold von Moosburg” in Ruh, K., ed. *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter* (Symposion Kloster Engelberg 1984). Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986, 125–134; Mojsisch, B. *Meister Eckhart. Analogie, Univozität und Einheit*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983, esp. pp. 42–56; and Koch, J. “Zur Analogielehre Meister Eckharts” in *Kleine Schriften. Erster Band*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1973. pp. 367–397. On Eckhart’s influence on Cusanus’ early works, see Wackerzapp, H. *Der Einfluss Meister Eckharts auf die ersten philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues (1440–1450)* (BGPTM 39.3). Münster: Aschendorff, 1962.

<sup>108</sup> Maurer, A., trans. Meister Eckhart. *Parisian Questions and Prologues*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974, p. 47.

Wenck is not wrong to see a similarity between Cusanus and Eckhart with respect to their views on images (Cusanus would agree that an image has being only by virtue of its exemplar); the problem is that he misinterprets both authors. Cusanus himself recognizes this, and never objects in his *Apologia* to the association of his doctrines with Eckhart, whom he clearly states Wenck has misunderstood, although he carefully distances himself from the controversial author for practical rather than doctrinal reasons (as will be discussed below).

### *Destruction of the Aristotelian Philosophy*

As indicated, the other main prong of Wenck's attack on Cusanus in *De ignota litteratura* is the assertion that the doctrine of learned ignorance destroys the Aristotelian philosophy. This attack is made by way of a lengthy and detailed enumeration of individual conclusions—again of his construction—each of which he refutes based on the claim that they violate one or more Aristotelian principles.<sup>109</sup> In the course of the treatise, Cusanus' doctrine will be accused of violating principles in Aristotle's *Categoriae*, *De interpretatione*, *Analytica Posteriora*, *De caelo*, *Physica*, *Metaphysica*, and *De anima*. That Wenck goes to the trouble of mentioning so many individual texts is no doubt intended to lend weight to his contention that Cusanus' doctrine undermines the *entire* philosophy of Aristotle. And since lack of education in philosophy and logic is a criticism Wenck repeatedly hurls against Cusanus, it also serves a polemical function, the clear implication being that if Cusanus had read and understood any of these major works of the Philosopher, he would have seen that his doctrine of learned ignorance is based on erroneous conclusions.

These references to 'violations' of Aristotelian philosophy begin already in the second conclusion, shortly after Wenck has completed his first attack on Cusanus' "Beghardism"; however we will here limit ourselves to pointing out two instances which go to the heart of Wenck's philosophical and theological objection to learned ignorance, namely, Cusanus' assertions, according to Wenck, a) that a finite intellect cannot attain to precise

---

<sup>109</sup> In total, Wenck attacks seven conclusions and corellaries as contradicting principles of the Aristotelian philosophy, respectively in concl. 2, cor. 1 and 2; concl. 3; concl. 3, cor. 1; concl. 5, cor. 3; concl. 6, cor. 3; concl. 8, cor. 2; and concl. 9, cor. 2. In addition to those which directly reference the Philosopher, a number of others are attacked as contradicting generally accepted philosophical principles (for example, concl. 6, cor. 1; concl. 7, cor. 3).



truth by means of similitudes, and b) that contradictories coincide in the Absolute maximum. The first occurs in conclusion 2, corollary 2, which states:

A finite intellect cannot through similitudes precisely attain the truth of things, since there always remains a difference between the measure and the measured, no matter how equal [they are].<sup>110</sup>

Paraphrased from Book I, ch. 3 of *De docta ignorantia*, Wenck rebuts this assertion with reference to Aristotle.<sup>111</sup> To the Philosopher, Wenck maintains, it is clear both that the intellect sees only in images and similitudes, and, although a similitude can never be identical to its exemplar, that the comparative difference remaining between them nevertheless does not destroy the possibility of knowledge, although it does mean that the intellect cannot precisely or wholly attain the truth.<sup>112</sup> However this is only to say that the intellect grasps the truth darkly rather than in its immediate simplicity (*non nude sed umbratice*)—an admission of the limitations of human knowledge which is furthermore “suitable to philosophy and theology”.<sup>113</sup>

Wenck thus again defends the fundamentally image-based nature of human understanding, in conformity with his Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle. That such symbolic knowledge can never perfectly conform to truth does not preclude its being an accurate representation of its exemplar, and therefore its status as genuine knowledge is intact. According to Wenck, by insisting that the intellect must attain the *precise* truth of something in order to know, Cusanus has placed an impossible condition upon knowledge. From a modern perspective, we might point out that the argument here is essentially over what we today refer to as a ‘correspondence’ vs. an ‘identity’ theory of truth. Wenck is clearly a representative

---

<sup>110</sup> “Finitus intellectus rerum veritatem per similitudinem non potest precise attingere, cum semper sit inter mensuram et mensuratum, quantumcumque equalia, manens differentia.” Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 28.

<sup>111</sup> “Hinc mensura et mensuratum, quantumcumque aequalia, semper differentia remanebunt. Non potest igitur finitus intellectus rerum veritatem per similitudinem precise attingere.” h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. I, ch. 3, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 28.

<sup>113</sup> “Clarum est apud Aristotelem ea que scimus minima esse eorum que ignoramus, et intellectum nostrum videre in ymagine et similitudine, nec equalitatem et similitudinem ydemptitatem posse fieri, nichilominus tamen manens differentia in comparatis ad invicem non tollit scienciam. Quod ergo veritatem vult per similitudinem non posse precise seu indivisibiliter intellectum attingere, quod est illud dicere quam quod non nude sed umbratice eandem intelligit, quod est consonum phylosophie et theologie, et infirmitatem nostre cognicionis fateri?” Ibid.



of the former theory, which states that knowledge is essentially *analogical*, and is based on having an idea that is an accurate representation, or similitude, of the truth; whereas the latter model, which conforms to Cusanus' position, states that true knowledge only obtains where the idea in the intellect is *identical* with its object, namely truth.

As Wenck goes on to explain in the following *conclusio*, which continues on the same theme, in denying the possibility of attaining knowledge through images and similitudes, Cusanus has failed to respect the natural limitations of human understanding. For "this man of learned ignorance aims to understand a thing in its purity [...] apart from all similitudes".<sup>114</sup> He has rejected the one form of knowledge legitimately attainable by the intellect—that attested to by Scripture and the Aristotelian philosophy—to assert in its place an impossible knowledge that pertains not to this life but to the afterlife.<sup>115</sup> Through the immodesty of his aspirations, he seeks to destroy the only form of knowledge available to man.

The first corollary of the third conclusion states that the unqualifiedly maximum coincides with the minimum and that in this Absolute maximum all contradictories whatsoever are harmoniously combined, connected, and united. This is that point which, above all else, Wenck finds appalling:

O how greatly the poison of error and falsehood is here disseminated, through this corollary destroying all scientific procedure and all inference, as well as all opposition and the law of contradiction, and as a consequence the entire doctrine of Aristotle, having destroyed the root of every doctrine.<sup>116</sup>

The type of knowledge which Cusanus asserts in place of conventional, symbolically-based understanding, according to Wenck, is one whose grounding principle stands in direct opposition to the fundamental governing principle of reason, namely, the principle of non-contradiction, as established by Aristotle in *Metaphysica* IV.<sup>117</sup> As his every doctrine is

<sup>114</sup> "Sed homo ille docte ignorancie vult [...] sequestrata omni similitudine, rem in sua puritate intelligere." Vansteenberghe, ed. (1910), p. 28.

<sup>115</sup> "[...] videre rem in sua puritate sicuti est, non est vie sed patrie." Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> "O quantum spargitur hic venenum erroris et perfidie, corollario isto destruyente omnem processum scientificum ac omnem consequenciam, pariter et tollente omnem oppositionem, pariter et legem contradictionis, et per consequens totam doctrinam Aristotelis, destructo semine omnis doctrine [...]" Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>117</sup> Re. *Metaphysica* IV, 3 (1005b 13–20): "[...] the most certain principle of all is that about which one cannot be mistaken [...] and [which is] not based on hypothesis. For the principle which the student of any form of being must grasp is no hypothesis; and that which a man must know if he knows anything, he must bring with him to his task. Clearly,

rooted in this principle, its rejection entails the destruction of Aristotelian philosophy as such; and since all of the sciences are based upon Aristotelian science, rationality and scientific procedure in their entirety are destroyed. Most significant of course, is the threat this poses to theology; for it would render theologians incapable of defending the rationality of the statements contained in Scripture.

These two passages thus frame Wenck's *philosophical* objection to learned ignorance, in that the first, by denying that the intellect knows symbolically and through images, rejects the only form of human knowledge that may be legitimately affirmed, and the second, in asserting that contradictories coincide in the Absolute maximum, opens the way for an impossible knowledge that would transcend the natural, rationally-governed limits of human understanding.

All of this conspires, according to Wenck, to alienate men from the "true mode of theologizing" since, as he later puts it, having granted one such unacceptable point, many others may follow<sup>118</sup>—such as that creatures are God, as the Beghards maintained. In other words, having simultaneously destroyed the regulating principle of reason and granted access to a contradictory and non-symbolic knowledge of truth, any statement about the divine must then be admitted, for there is no systematic basis upon which it might be rejected. This "true" mode is moreover given to us by God himself, whose words are revealed to us in Scripture, where it is written: "Search the Scriptures in which you think to have eternal life; and they are what give testimony to me".<sup>119</sup> We are admonished by God to seek his truth in Scripture; however in Scripture we are told that we know only symbolically and through similitudes of truth. Thus Cusanus' doctrine not only undermine scientific theology, but the very authority of Scripture itself, whose own statements were thus not to be believed.<sup>120</sup> So does the neglect of reason ultimately lead to the erosion of the Faith.

---

then, it is a principle of this kind that is the most certain of all principles. Let us next state *what* this principle this is. 'It is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong to and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation' [...]." Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Vol. 17. Treddinick, H., trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 161.

<sup>118</sup> Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 32.

<sup>119</sup> *John* 5:39.

<sup>120</sup> "Quod si divinitus traditus modus theologizandi scripture sancte de medio aufertur, nonne cessaret testimonium Salvatoris de seipso datum, Ioh. Vº: 'Scrutimini scripturas in quibus putatis vitam eternam habere; et ille sunt que testimonium perhibent de me?'" Vansteenbergh, ed. (1910), p. 32.

*De ignota litteratura as a Document in the History of Fifteenth-Century  
Sectarian Religious Controversy*

All of these concerns converge in a statement made by Wenck at the end of his commentary on the fourth *conclusio*, where he writes:

From these [things] it is clear how much poisoning of science and of mores has been introduced by this most abstract understanding (called learned ignorance—in the vernacular, the life of detachment [*abgeschaiden leben*, sic.]), in which is a fading away of the senses and in which the glorifying of God is neglected, by which God is exalted among the gentiles and on earth, according to the verse taken: “Be still and see that I am God”.<sup>121</sup>

Learned ignorance is synonymous with the ‘life of detachment’, insofar as the doctrine seeks to ‘detach’ itself from all forms of worldly knowledge, abstracting itself away from sensible images and *fantasmata*. And, having detached itself from human knowledge, according to Wenck, it asserts in its place a contradictory, unknowable knowledge which violates the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction and destroys the foundations of logic and the possibility of theological science. In thus illicitly aspiring to the divine, not only is knowledge abandoned, but also the glorification of God, who may only be exalted through his creation. This ‘detachment’ is thus also a detachment from those traditional authorities governing knowledge, namely Scripture and scholastic theology. Lastly, by rendering impossible any logical defence of the pronouncements made in Scripture, learned ignorance would expose the Faith to the ridicule of the unfaithful.<sup>122</sup> For, like other *antiqui*, Wenck believed that only a theology thoroughly integrated with Aristotelian science could defend the Faith against the accusations of infidels that Christians hold beliefs contrary to logic.

With respect to Wenck’s preoccupation with the theme of detachment, or *Abgeschiedenheit*, it should be noted that this was a notion particularly associated with Eckhart, who penned a treatise entitled *Von abgeschiedenheit*, in which detachment is extolled as the highest of virtues.<sup>123</sup> This is the source of Wenck’s attack on the “abgeschieden Leben”, and of his association of this doctrine with Cusanus’ learned ignorance. In fact there are

---

<sup>121</sup> “Ex quibus liquet quantam venositatem sciencie et morum induxerit abstractissima illa intelligencia, nuncupata *docta ignorantia*, vulgariter: ‘abgeschaiden leben’, in qua sensuum est evanescencia, et postposita Dei glorificacio qua exaltatur Deus in gentibus et in terra, iuxta assumptum thema: ‘Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus’ [...]” Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> “Ubi tunc erunt consequencie prophetarum salvatoris, evangelistarum ac apostolorum, quibus dinoscitur fides non modicum roborata contra perfidos?” Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Quint, J. ed. *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke* V. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963.

many interesting parallels between the two, although not for the reasons Wenck gives. The state of detachment described by Eckhart in this treatise is, according to Enders, a state of pure indeterminate intellectuality,<sup>124</sup> which is accordant with Cusanus' description of the goal of learned ignorance as a state of "simplest intellectuality",<sup>125</sup> which is likewise attained through a progressive abstraction of thought from all sense data. Eckhart's assertion that this detached state exceeds even love and the will furthermore shows that he and Cusanus were alike in propounding a fundamentally intellectual, as opposed to an affective mystical theology.<sup>126</sup>

In conclusion, we have seen the close interplay of faith and reason in Wenck's attack on Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance, which the Heidelberger theologian believed to undermine both. For Wenck, the limitations and guidelines of human knowledge upon which science must base itself are those prescribed in Scripture, and reason must neither neglect nor seek to go beyond them; rather faith means to accept these fundamental rules—e.g., that to know is to know *per speculum et enigmate*—and to pursue science accordingly. Thus Wenck was able to accuse Cusanus at once of faulty reason and weak faith.

There was a genuine scientific basis to Wenck's objections, the philosophical and theological implications of which were furthermore tied to real and pressing concerns of the day. Wenck could have chosen to present a purely scientific refutation of learned ignorance, nevertheless he opted instead to make his case largely through invective and slanderous

---

<sup>124</sup> Enders (2008), p. 41: "Der abgeschiedene Geist des Menschen ist daher nichts anderes als der form- und daher bestimmungslose *intellectus inquantum intellectus* in seiner ursprünglichen Reinheit und Lauterkeit", which is moreover beyond all affectivity. Enders furthermore regards this notion in Eckhart as having Aristotelian provenance: "Eckhart konzipiert den abgeschiedenen Geist des Menschen analog zu seinem Intellekt-Begriff in den Pariser Quaestionen und damit zum *intellectus possibilis* aristotelischer Provenienz: Wie nach Aristoteles der der Seele immanente Geist (von körperlichem) abgetrennt (!), einfach und eigenschaftslos sowie unvermischt sein muß und daher auch mit nichts anderem Gemeinschaft haben darf, um aufnahmefähig zu sein für das Denkbare und deshalb diesem, d.h. den Formen als den Gegenständen des Denkens, nur der Möglichkeit, nicht aber der Wirklichkeit nach ähnlich ist, bevor er denkt, so ist nach Meister Eckhart der abgeschiedene, von allen zeitlichen und räumlichen Bestimmungen abstrahiert [...]". Ibid., pp. 41–42.

<sup>125</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. III, pp. 151–152.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Enders (2008), esp. pp. 108–118, on "Die Superiorität der Abgeschiedenheit über die traditionell höchsten Tugenden [Liebe, Demut, Barmherzigkeit]" and "Die vollkommene Erkenntnis und die Allmacht des abgeschiedenen Geistes". In the latter chapter in particular it is explained that in Eckhart "Abgeschiedenheit" is "doch eine Bestimmung des Geistes und nicht des Willens".

associations.<sup>127</sup> At the basis of Wenck's objections to both Cusanus and Eckhart was their alleged failure to make necessary distinctions, both logically and theologically. However, it was primarily by neglecting the distinctions made in *De docta ignorantia* that Wenck was able to render heretical conclusions from it, and thereby to conflate the doctrines of Cusanus and Eckhart with each other as well with those of the Beghards, Beguines, and other 'heretical' lay movements.

As we have seen, that Wenck did not so much criticize Cusanus through a careful philosophical analysis of his ideas as seek to incriminate him by association with condemned doctrines and movements was characteristic of fifteenth century debates.<sup>128</sup> The nature of his suspicions can furthermore be regarded as a typical feature of late-medieval scientific

---

<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, sometime between the end of 1449 and 1455, Wenck wrote a rebuttal of Cusanus' *Apologia*, entitled *De facie scholae doctae ignorantiae*, unfortunately no longer extant. (See Haubst (1955), pp. 102–3.) That Wenck wrote the document is certain, as he refers to it by title in notes made in 1455 (in MS Cod. Pal. 149, f. 24r). The passage where the text is mentioned reads: "Cum in *De mystica theologia* scriptum sit: 'Ignote ascende!', in eodem libro 'ignorantia' capitur non ut est in irrationalibus, sed ut est in intellectualibus et divinis, non dicens privationem notitiae, sed praeeminentiam, excessum et profectum notitiae. Quam acceptionem 'ignorantiae' puto ignorasse eum, qui scripsit 'De docta ignorantia' libellos tres, quos improbavi per 'Ignotam litteraturam'. Quam videns ille de *Docta ignorantia* fecit *Apologiam* maledicendo me nominatim blasphemiiis inauditis. Contra quam *Apologiam* scripsi libellum 'De facie scholae doctae ignorantiae', ut agnoscatur, quam detrahat doctrinae omnium universitatum" (Haubst [1955], p. 102). According to Haubst, in remarks made in these notes which refer directly to *De docta ignorantia*, Wenck does not repeat any of the criticisms made in *De Ignota litteratura*, nor does he hurl any invective. There are no accusations of heresy nor any mention of condemned doctrines. In contrast to the polemical intent of the *De ignota litteratura*, Wenck's *De facie scholae doctae ignorantiae* appears to have aimed more at bringing the concept of learned ignorance into agreement with scholastic theology. Haubst writes that in his later works, especially his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius, Wenck withdraws significantly from his earlier criticism of Cusanus, possibly in reaction to Cusanus' own criticism of him in the *Apologia*, which Wenck had evidently read: "Von einer solchen Polemik gegen das *incomprehensibiliter comprehendere* ist in dem Kommentar zur Himmlischen Hierarchie nichts mehr zu spüren. Es scheint, daß Wenck aus der cusanischen Apologie erkannt hatte, daß er damit auf dem Holzwege war" (ibid., p. 107). However, it is also apparent that Wenck still regarded Cusanus as an enemy of scholasticism, as the concern of *De facie* was to show how greatly 'the school of learned ignorance' destroys the teaching of all the universities.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Hoenen (2003), p. 30: "The official documents of the *Wegestreit* seldom give information about the doctrinal arguments of the various parties involved. Only brief statements are reported, if any. Rather, attention is focused on references to past condemnations that affected the views of the antagonists. Opponents are discredited not through philosophical arguments but through the claim that they defend condemned propositions. Past condemnations, then, were being used to decide philosophical matters."

controversies, which were characterized by concern for orthodoxy and fear of innovation.<sup>129</sup>

That *De ignota litteratura* focused so strongly on trying to tie Cusanus' doctrine to Eckhart and the Beghards furthermore shows that concern for the propagation of heretical doctrines was one of Wenck's primary motivations for writing the treatise, and there is no doubt that Wenck indeed regarded *De docta ignorantia* as an example of the heretical literature produced within the tradition of the "abgeschieden Leben". Accordingly, Wenck's *De ignota litteratura* belongs to a larger body of work—in the form of letters, sermons, and treatises—in which the Heidelberg doctor fought against what he perceived to be the heresies of the spiritual movements of his day. Because Wenck viewed *De docta ignorantia* as an example of 'Beghastian' literature—as inappropriate as the designation may be—both the treatise he wrote in response to it and Cusanus' subsequent *Apologia* take their place as documents in the history of fifteenth-century sectarian religious controversy.

#### CUSANUS' RESPONSE TO JOHANNES WENCK: THE *APOLOGIA DOCTAE IGNORANTIAE* AND *IDIOTA* TREATISES

As noted above, Cusanus probably did not become aware of Wenck's polemical treatise until 1449. However once he had read it, he promptly responded by writing the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (*Defence of Learned Ignorance*). While this was his first and only direct response to Wenck's attack, the impact of the Heidelberg theologian's criticism is still manifestly apparent in the works following the *Apologia*, namely, the *Idiota* treatises of 1450. As we shall see, it is evident that Wenck's criticism had a significant effect on—if it was not indeed the inspiration for—this trilogy of works. Before we examine the echoes of Wenck's criticism in *Idiota de sapientia* and *Idiota de mente*, we will first turn to the *Apologia*.

#### *The Apologia doctae ignorantiae*

Written in 1449, the full title of the treatise, namely, "Apologia doctae ignorantiae: Discipuli ad discipulum", immediately indicates something

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Hoenen, M. "Zurück zu Autorität und Tradition. Geistesgeschichtliche Hintergründe des Traditionalismus an den spätmittelalterlichen Universitäten" in *Herbst des Mittelalters*? (MM 31). Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 133–146, esp. pp. 134–135.

of the curious narrative conceit adopted here by Cusanus; for the treatise purports to be the record of a discussion between two unnamed disciples of Cusanus and his doctrine of learned ignorance. The ‘disciple/author’ of the text writes to his fellow ‘disciple’ of how he had just that day come into possession of Wenck’s treatise. Having read it with great distress, he immediately went to his master, to ask the latter’s opinion about Wenck’s accusations.<sup>130</sup> It is this ‘record’ of his conversation with Cusanus that the ‘disciple/author’ then reports to his fellow ‘disciple’ of learned ignorance. Thus Cusanus’ *apologia* of his doctrine is presented as though it were a *reportatio*, or third-party account.<sup>131</sup>

A few things may be immediately pointed out about this narrative strategy: First, and most obvious, Cusanus speaks nowhere in this text in the first person and therefore does not directly address any of his remarks to Gelnhausen, Wenck, or anyone else; nor does the fictitious disciple address any real person, but only another fictitious disciple. This is the only of Cusanus’ treatises to adopt such a format.<sup>132</sup> Unlike Wenck’s *De ignota litteratura*, which personally addressed the Abbot, the *Apologia* is deliberately designed to have an anonymous character. Second, the disciple/author’s assertion that he had only that day received Wenck’s treatise, read it, and then described its reproaches to the Cardinal is intended to give the reader the impression that Cusanus had known nothing of the treatise until a ‘disciple’ had told him about it, and that he himself had not actually read the treatise, but was only responding to a description thereof.<sup>133</sup> How seriously the reader is intended to take this conceit is unclear. As far as records indicate, there was never any doubt to anyone who possessed it that this treatise was written by Cusanus himself, nor any indication that Cusanus wished to conceal his authorship, or to pass the treatise off as anonymous. That being the case, we must assume that the narrative structure adopted in this treatise is a rhetorical device whose purpose Cusanus felt would be apparent to its intended audience.

<sup>130</sup> h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae discipuli ad discipulum*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>131</sup> Again supported by the disciple/author’s closing remarks to his brother: “Ecce, condiscipule praeamate, quae ex pectore praeceptoris pro defensione Doctae ignorantiae recollegi [...]” Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>132</sup> Cusanus wrote a number of treatises in dialogue format, in which he himself is explicitly a character (i.e., *De possesset*, *De genesi*, *De non aliud*, *De apice theoriae*, *De ludo globi*); however this is the only of his treatises to adopt this pseudo-reportatio format.

<sup>133</sup> As evinced also by several other passages in the text, most notably when the ‘disciple/author’ offers to read *De ignota* aloud to his master so that the latter may refute its criticisms: “Ego autem continuo admonui, ut me legentem Ignotam litteraturam ad eius confutationem animum erigeret [...]” Ibid., p. 6.



In fact, the employment of this strategy is itself already an implicit critique and rebuttal of Wenck, and thus is worth examining in some detail. While we cannot know with certainty why Cusanus chose to compose his *Apologia* in just this way, a number of points can nonetheless be posited as highly probable based on internal textual evidence. The first is that Cusanus wished to structure the treatise along the lines of a Platonic dialogue—in particular Plato's *Apologia*, which presents Socrates' account of his defense at his trial in Athens. This is made even more probable by the fact that the very first statement made by Cusanus in the text, in response to his devoted disciple's dismay at Wenck's attacks, refers to Socrates—who was wise because he knew he was ignorant, and who in his day similarly had to suffer the attacks of intelligentsia who boasted of their wisdom although they were ignorant.<sup>134</sup> Cusanus' intention to depict himself as a Socratic hero and Wenck as a sophist becomes clear as the treatise unfolds.<sup>135</sup>

The second likely reason for this strategy is Cusanus' apparent desire—in keeping with Socratic modesty—to not appear defensive or combative, or indeed even to dignify Wenck's (often polemical) attacks with a (direct) response.<sup>136</sup> Of course, there is a certain irony in Cusanus' creation of a fictional 'disciple' to attack an opponent whose criticisms 'the master' claims not to care about at all, which rather undermines his purported neutrality and modesty. However, it is nonetheless evident from the text that Cusanus *wishes* to convey the impression that he is not seriously perturbed by Wenck's attacks and refuses to be drawn into debate with him.

---

<sup>134</sup> "In quo [i.e., *De ignota litteratura*] cum legerem graves invectivas et iniurias contra praeceptorem nostrum [i.e., Cusanus] et eius Doctae ignorantiae libellos, cum animo multa displicentia conturbato praeceptorem adii [...]. Subrisit parumper praeceptor et me amoroso quodam oculo respectans aiebat: 'Non turberis, amice, sed gratias age creatori, qui tantum tibi luminis tribuit, quod hunc hominem sapientia antecedis quasi Socrates sciolos sui temporis.' Quaerebam ego, in quo Atheniensis Socrates praecellerat. Respondit: 'Quia se scivit ignorantem; ceteri autem, qui se aliquid egregii scire gloriabantur, cum multa ignorent, non se sciebant ignorantes.'". h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> This also figures strongly in *Idiota de sapientia* (discussed in respective section below), where the character of the 'layman' is posited as a Socratic figure.

<sup>136</sup> This desire to appear modest and non-defensive is evinced at various points in the text. The 'disciple/author' must several times overcome the master's reluctance to respond to Wenck's attacks, for example, when he reports the latter's reaction to his suggestion that he read aloud to him from Wenck's text: "[...] sed segnis atque tardior mihi visus est, quam optabam. Nam non est sibi visum scriptum illud tanti esse, quod aut legi aut reprehendi conveniat." This is followed by a long quotation from Dionysius in attestation of the fact that "[...] non decere gravem virum attendere ad confutationem ignorantium [...]." h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 6. This reluctance to engage in debate with Wenck is also connected to Cusanus' criticism of scholasticism, as we shall see below.



The narrative structure is his way of maintaining a distance, be it only symbolic, from the debate.

A third reason for this peculiar narrative style is that Cusanus did not write this treatise as a personal response to Wenck, but rather more generally as a defense of his doctrine of learned ignorance, to be circulated amongst those avid recipients or *discipuli* of his philosophical works and to be used by them as a 'Lehrstück' for better understanding and defending his doctrine against critics, as well as to aid in its promulgation.<sup>137</sup> The 'anonymous' structure of the work supports this idea, as well as the fact that it is designed as an exchange between two students of Cusan philosophy. The narrative conceit of a 'school' of Cusan philosophy, though somewhat fanciful, is not entirely far-fetched, as Cusanus had by this time something of a following at Tegernsee, and it is probable that he wrote this treatise primarily with them in mind.<sup>138</sup> Thus all of the above are probable reasons for Cusanus' electing to present his response to Wenck's

---

<sup>137</sup> Indeed, this is made all but explicit by the disciple/author's opening address to his fellow disciple, in which he speaks of the latter's zeal for learned ignorance and desire to collect everything which emanates from Cusanus regarding these matters, as well as to convert others to the doctrine: "Rettulit mihi aliquando communis praeceptor noster, magister Nicolaus de Cusa [...] quantum valeas in coincidentiis, quas in libellis Doctae ignorantiae [...] ac in aliis plerisque suis opusculis nobis patefecit, quoque studio ardeas, ut omnia colligas, quae passim in hiis rebus ab eodem emanant; quodque tu neminem peritorum te praeterire sinas, cum quo de hac re non conferas, multosque induxeris, qui hoc studium spreverant, ut inveterata consuetudine, qua Aristotelicae traditioni insudarunt, parum intercepta in has se conferant considerationes ea [...]." Ibid., p. 1. It is for this reason, the disciple/author maintains, that he thinks it right to bring to the brother's attention "[...] aliqua [...] quae non plene instructos avertere possent [...]." Ibid. That the *Apologia* is intended to attract new followers is furthermore supported by the disciple/author's remark at the end of the treatise that he submits this report to his brother not only for study but for further dissemination: "[...] ea tibi legenda atque, ubi opus videris, communicanda transmitto [...]." Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>138</sup> In a way, the *Apologia* is more like an encomium that Cusanus wrote for himself than an apology, as he praises himself and his teaching extensively throughout, though in the voice of his devoted 'disciple'. That said, it is interesting to note that the encomium of learned ignorance written by one of Cusanus' real-life disciples, namely the *Laudatorium doctae ignorantiae* of Bernard of Waging was a very different sort of text. Consisting largely of paraphrases from *De docta ignorantia* and extolling the doctrine of learned ignorance without providing any arguments in support of it, the *Laudatorium* would have made a poor response to Johannes Wenck. One wonders whether in the *Apologia* Cusanus creates his 'ideal' disciple—the one he would like to have, who defends his ideas in the way he would like them defended. (Of course, Cusanus did not see Bernard's *Laudatorium*, composed in 1451, until several years after he wrote his *Apologia*. On Cusanus' reaction to Bernard's work, see section below, "Reception of Cusanus' works in the monasteries, and the development of the *debate*".

criticism in this form, namely, as a pseudo-Platonic dialogue in which his views are voiced through a fictional disciple.

Cusanus is not at all blind to the political aspect of this debate, and is quick to sniff out the ulterior motive behind Wenck's attack, namely, conciliarism. Neither does he hesitate to make explicit what Wenck chose not to mention in *De ignota litteratura* (probably because Gelnhausen had already switched to papal support by the time Wenck wrote it and therefore he could not very well use it as an attack against the esteemed Cardinal). Cusanus gladly seizes the opportunity to use Wenck's conciliarism against him, explaining to his 'disciple' that he and the Abbot Maulbronn (a.k.a. John of Gelnhausen) had both been in the papal camp at Basel, whilst Wenck "deviated from all the doctors of the University of Heidelberg and took up the condemned cause of the men of Basel".<sup>139</sup> Wenck, he maintains, is resentful of Cusanus' efforts in support of the pope at Basel and later at the provincial diets, and is now trying to tarnish Cusanus' reputation in any way he can.<sup>140</sup> Cusanus' pointed remark that Wenck "deviated" from the other doctors at Heidelberg, is no doubt intended to call into question not only the orthodoxy of Wenck's own beliefs, but also his commitment to academic unity—which was a serious charge in the Middle Ages, as all students and doctors were required by university regulations to swear an oath to uphold it.<sup>141</sup> Thus Wenck is portrayed as a malcontent and political dissident who sought in the past to subvert both ecclesiastical and academic unity.

The treatise then goes on to address many of Wenck's individual criticisms and "theses", and occasionally quotes from *De ignota litteratura*; however it by no means seeks to refute in detail each individual accusation in an academic manner. His response treats Wenck's attacks in a more summary fashion, addressing only those points he considers most important. In this respect it is significant that Cusanus wastes very few words rebutting the accusations of Beghardism which Wenck made so elaborately in *De ignota litteratura*. In fact he mentions the matter only

---

<sup>139</sup> "[...] Wenck, qui ab universis doctoribus Heidelbergensis studii abierat et partem dampnatam Basiliensium sumpsit [...]" in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 5.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Cf., for example, the statutes of the Theology faculty of the University of Köln from the 14th century: "Item [statuimus] quod [licenciandi] servabunt pacem, concordiam et tranquillitatem dictarum universitatis et facultatis; et maxime unionem inter quatuor facultates ac inter seculares et religiosos." Bianco, F. *Die Alte Universität Köln*. Band 2. Köln: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1974 [reprint of the 1855 Köln edition], p. 45.

very briefly and late in the treatise, showing that he regards the accusation to be too outlandish to merit lengthy discussion. Of it he writes:

He [Wenck] adds that the bishop of Strasbourg condemned those who were asserting that God is formally all things, and that they were God, not being distinct from him in nature. Then, attacking the supporting reason, he says, if there were neither distinction nor opposition of relations in God, what would follow would be altogether absurd; for in that case the Trinity would be abolished, etc.<sup>142</sup>

To this statement Cusanus merely replies, "Should not this falsifier be ridiculed rather than refuted? Why does he not state the place where this thesis is found in the books of *Learned Ignorance*?" And his 'disciple' is quick to back him up on this, saying that he indeed could find nowhere in these books the statement that God coincides with creatures.<sup>143</sup> The 'disciple' does however find it written that all of the divine attributes coincide in God, about whose infinite simplicity all the saints were furthermore agreed.<sup>144</sup> That this divine simplicity is compatible with its trinity of persons is patent, Cusanus adds, as is explained in *Learned Ignorance* and is confirmed, for example, by Pope Celestine, who said that the Holy Trinity is one in such a way that it is three and *vice versa*.<sup>145</sup>

Thus, Cusanus concludes, if Wenck has no understanding of how unity and trinity coincide in the divinity while the persons remain distinct, he is obviously incapable of understanding any theological matters. To the "stiff-necked" (*durae cervicis*) Wenck, it is moreover inconceivable, according to Cusanus, that in the oneness of the Godhead, the persons could yet

<sup>142</sup> "Subiungit episcopum Argentinensem condempnasse eos, qui dicebant Deum esse omnia formaliter et se esse Deum sine distinctione per naturam. Deinde contra probationem dicit absurdissimum esse, quod sequeretur, si nulla esset distinctio nec relationis oppositio in divinis; sublata enim tunc foret Tinitas, et cetera." h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>143</sup> "Ad quae praeceptor [i.e., Cusanus]: 'Nonne falsarius iste potius ridendus quam confutandus esset? Cur non dicit locum, ubi in libellis Doctae ignorantiae haec conclusio reperitur?' Et ego [i.e., the 'disciple/author']: 'Quia nusquam reperitur, dicere non potuit. Legi enim ego quam diligenter et non memini umquam repperisse, quod omnia cum Deo coincidunt.'" Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>144</sup> "Nam omnia attributa divina coincidere in Deo [...] necessarium comperi et ita legi; et in hoc concordant omnes sancti, qui ad infinitam Dei simplicitatem respexerunt." Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> "Cum hoc tamen stat superbenedicta Trinitas. Infinita enim simplicitas admittit ita Deum unum esse quod est trinus, ita trinum quod est unus, sicut clarius illud in libellis Doctae ignorantiae explicatur. Legitur consimiliter Coelestinum Papam in professione fidei sic dixisse: "Profitemur nos credere indivisibilem sanctam Trinitatem, hoc est Patrem et Filium et Spiritum sanctum, ita unum ut trinum et ita trinum ut unum."'" Ibid.

be distinct, because “words whose significations are not compatible with theology hinder him”.<sup>146</sup> Thus he attacks Wenck’s insistence on rationally-grounded symbolism in the practice of theology, on the grounds that it prevents him from recognizing that in the Trinity there is no “difference” in the sense implied by the conventional, or “proper” sense of the word. Rather, he writes, whoever would “ascend unto the divine mode must rise above all imaginable and intelligible modes”.<sup>147</sup> By refusing to elevate his thinking beyond the everyday, “proper” sense of words (which are meant to describe creatures), Wenck cuts himself off from being able to understand theological matters. Thus Wenck’s association of learned ignorance with the heretical doctrines of the Beguines is dismissed as a failure on Wenck’s part to distinguish between the ordinary and the theological uses of language. A little further on, Cusanus ties up the matter with the statement, “And if there were Beghards who made such statements as our adversary alleges (i.e., that they were, in nature, God), then they were rightly condemned”.<sup>148</sup> Wenck’s assertion that learned ignorance is a doctrine of the “abgeschieden Leben”, Cusanus later mocks, saying (in the voice of his ‘disciple’): “It is amazing, regarding this grey-haired man of advanced age who considers himself one of the schooled, that he writes such puerile foolishness, especially when he interprets learned ignorance as the ‘detached life’.”—Cusanus notably reverts here to the Latin ‘abstracta vita’, ignoring Wenck’s attempt to associate his writings with vernacular mystical literature.<sup>149</sup> No further explanation is provided, Cusanus apparently regarding the matter settled. In this connection, it is significant that for all his promotion of ‘idiota’ theology, Cusanus (with the exception of a single sermon) composed no works in the vernacular (although it is true that he regularly preached in Mösselfränkisch) at a time when mystical

<sup>146</sup> “[...] obsunt ei vocabula, quorum significata theologiae non conveniunt.” Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> “Cum enim dicitur Patrem unam esse personam et Filium alteram et Spiritum sanctum tertiam, non potest alteritas significatum suum tenere, cum sit haec dictio imposita, ut significet alteritatem ab unitate divisam et distinctam; et ita non est alteritas sine numero. [...] Unde ait commentator Boethii De Trinitate [...]: ‘Ex quo in divinis non est numerus, ubi trinitas est unitas [...], tunc proprie non est differentia in divinis.’ Dicit ‘proprie’ secundum impositionem vocabuli [...]. Necesse est, ut se eleve quisque supra omnes modos imaginabiles et intelligibiles, qui ad divinum modum scandere cupit.” Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>148</sup> “Et si fuerunt Begardi, qui sic dicebant, ut scribit, scilicet se esse Deum per naturam, merito fuerunt condemnati [...].” Ibid., pp. 28–29.

<sup>149</sup> “Et ego [i.e., ‘discipulus’]: ‘Mirandum est de profectae aetatis cano homine, qui se sciolum putat, quod ita pueriles ineptias scribat, maxime quando interpretatur doctam ignorantiam ‘abstractam vitam’.” Ibid., p. 31.

handbooks in vernacular languages were proliferating in Europe—even Wenck himself, as we saw, having penned such a handbook.

Cusanus was similarly unperturbed by Wenck's pointed emphasis on the meaning of the words "Be still and see that I am God", in which the "I", Wenck insisted, indicated that every creature is excluded from God. This assertion, Cusanus says, he makes "naïvely" (*pueriliter*); for "who was ever so foolish as to maintain that God, who forms all things, is anything other than that than which a greater cannot be conceived", and who therefore cannot possess the same kind of being as things found in creation?<sup>150</sup> While no one would be so stupid as to assert the above, there is nonetheless, Cusanus continues, a higher sense in which God is all things in the manner of being "the Singularity of singularities" or "unsingularly Singular", as Avicenna also posited in his *Metaphysics*.<sup>151</sup> However, this higher mode is not for everyone, and Cusanus concedes that he, like Avicenna, believes that this way of thinking "is not acceptable to an adversary who is from the common people and who distorts the loftiest prophetic visions into commonplace conceptions which are not representative of God".<sup>152</sup> Thus here again it is implied that Wenck is a sort of simple-minded lout who lacks the imagination and refinement of understanding to see that in theology it is necessary to go beyond the conventional signification of words to a divine language more fitting of God. It is also notable that in the *Apoloogia* Cusanus makes an uncharacteristic number of references to "scholastic" authorities, such as Avicenna, likely to combat the accusation that his doctrine is opposed "to the teaching of all the universities". The effort he makes in this treatise to show that learned ignorance is not opposed to scholastic theology shows that he does not wish to be perceived as one who advocates the rejection of scholarly learning in favour of an irrationalist, subjective theology—as had Wenck charged.

In contrast to his dismissive response to the charge of Begardism, Cusanus is quite careful when it comes to representing his views on

<sup>150</sup> "Ubi autem adicit prophetam per pronomen 'ego' singularizasse Deum et exclusisse et distinxisse ab omni creatura, in quo ait propositum suum solidari, pueriliter satis se fundare videtur. Nemo enim umquam adeo desipuit, ut Deum aliud affirmaret quam id, quo maius concipi nequit, qui est formans omnia." Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>151</sup> "[...] de regno Dei non potest esse alteritas, ubi est simplicitas et pax, quae omnem sensum exsuperat [...], bene eo modo, quo de Dei singularitate loquitur Avicenna in *Metaphysica* sua de stabiliendo prophetam [...]. Eo enim modo singularitas [...] est singularitas singularitatum, et sic Deus dicitur singularis insingulariter [...]." Ibid., pp. 9–10.

<sup>152</sup> "Fateor tamen cum Avicenna ista adversario non congruere, qui de vulgo est et ad vulgares conceptus Deo improporcionales propheticas altissimas visiones [...]." Ibid., p. 10.

Meister Eckhart. He admits to having read many of the latter's works and comes to Eckhart's defence, although in a way which at the same time seeks to distance himself from the controversial author.<sup>153</sup> When 'asked' by his 'disciple' whether he had learned anything from Eckhart, Cusanus responds that he had seen in various libraries many of his expository works, sermons, and disputations. He had also read the articles extracted from Eckhart's works on John which had been criticized by others, and Eckhart's own apology of his works;<sup>154</sup> however in none of these works had he ever found that Eckhart maintained creation to be the Creator. He furthermore regarded Eckhart as a man of "genius and devotion".<sup>155</sup> Where Wenck had argued that Cusanus (in asserting that all things are what they are by virtue of their being in Absolute being) maintained, like Eckhart, that created being is God, Cusanus responds by showing how Wenck misunderstood both Eckhart's and his own writings.<sup>156</sup>

At the same time, however, he asserts that Eckhart's works should be removed from public places, since they contain some statements "contrary to the custom of the other doctors", which the people are likely to misunderstand, although for "intelligent men" his writings contain many subtle and useful things.<sup>157</sup> Thus, the restrictions Cusanus would place on the works of Eckhart are only those that should be placed on all works of

<sup>153</sup> A fact also recognized by Frost (cf. Frost, S. "Die Meister Eckhart Rezeption des Nikolaus von Kues" in Schwaetzer, H., ed. *Nicolaus Cusanus. Perspektiven seiner Geistphilosophie*. Regensburg: Roderer, 2003, p. 152), and Steer (cf. Steer, G. "Die Predigten des Cusanus im Vergleich mit dem Predigtwerk von Meister Eckhart" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 145–169, pp. 162–163).

<sup>154</sup> In fact we know that Cusanus had a collection of Eckhart's works in his possession at least by 1444, in the form of the well-known Cod. Cus. 21 (Cusanus-bibliothek, Bernkastel-Kues). This codex contained Eckhart's *Opus Tripartitum*. For a lengthy study of this codex see Frost, S. *Nikolaus von Kues und Meister Eckhart. Rezeption im Spiegel der Marginalien zum Opus Tripartitum Meister Eckharts*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006. As *De docta ignorantia* was completed in 1440, this codex could not have had any influence on the treatise upon which Wenck is commenting. There are no explicit references to Eckhart in *De docta ignorantia*, although Koch noticed that two citations from Maimonides in Book I, chapter 16 match verbatim the same passages in Eckhart's commentary on Exodus. In general, however, Eckhardian influence is marked only in Cusanus works after 1444. See Koch, J. *Vier Predigten im Geiste Eckharts (Cusanus-Texte I)*. *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* Bd. 2/5. Heidelberg: Ernst Hoffman, 1936, p. 55.

<sup>155</sup> "Aiebat tamen praeceptor [Cusanus] se numquam legisse ipsum sensisse creaturam esse creatorem, laudans ingenium et studium ipsius [...]" h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 25.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>157</sup> "[...] [Cusanus] optavit, quod libri sui amoverentur de locis publicis, quia vulgus non est aptus ad ea, quae praeter consuetudinem aliorum doctorum ipse saepe intermiscebat, licet per intelligentes multa subtilia et utilia in ipsis reperiantur." *Ibid.*, p. 25.

mystical theology—which has always been a rarefied study reserved for a select few—and are not a reflection of any problematic or false statements in Eckhart himself, according to the Cardinal. Nevertheless, though he defends Eckhart and professes his admiration for the man, he stops short of admitting that the latter had any influence upon his own work, and seems not to want to associate himself too closely with the controversial mystic.

Having recommended that access to Eckhart's works be limited, Cusanus adds a short list of other works he thinks should also be restricted. What all of these works have in common, he asserts, is that they concern "higher truths" whose subject matter is the "intelligible light" or "intellectual light".<sup>158</sup> By this light, Cusanus means the sort of supra-rational knowledge which looks beyond created truths to their source through the application of a hyper-rational reasoning which exceeds the dictates of Aristotelian logic. Because such knowledge transcends rational knowing, it can only be identified as a kind of learned ignorance. And it is for this reason that "men of little understanding chance to fall into error when they search out higher [things] without learned ignorance".<sup>159</sup> But because men of 'common' understanding, like Wenck, lack learned ignorance, they will only be "blinded" by these intelligible truths when they behold them, and misinterpret them as error.<sup>160</sup>

Cusanus furthermore takes some trouble to combat the accusation that he does not know the difference between an image and its exemplar; and in fact his refutation of this point forms the only occasion in the *Apologia*

---

<sup>158</sup> These works are, namely, everything by Pseudo-Dionysius, Marius Victorinus' *Ad Candidum Arrianum*, the *Clavis Physicae* of Theodorus, Eriugena's *Periphyseos*, all books by David of Dinant, John of Mossbach's commentaries on the propositions of Proclus, and, he says, "all other such books". In *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, pp. 29–30. He does not include his own works in this list; however he made clear at the beginning of the treatise that he feels they should not be indiscriminately disseminated: i.e., with respect to the unfortunate fact that Wenck acquired a copy of *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus wrote that the sages of antiquity always took great care to ensure that mystical teachings, like those of Dionysius or Hermes Trismegistus, not fall into the hands of the unlearned, which amounts to casting pearls before swine: "Si quis graviore prisci temporis sapientes attendit, comperit magno studio praecavisse, ne mystica ad indoctorum manus pervenirent. Sic Hermetem Trismegistum Aesculapio atque Ariopagitam Dionysium Timotheo praecepisse legimus, quod et Christum nostrum docuisse scimus; inhibuit enim margaritam, quam regnum Dei figurat, ante porcos proici, in quibus non est intellectus." In *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 5.

<sup>159</sup> "Accidit autem hoc viris parvi intellectus, ut in errores incident, quando altiora sine docta ignorantia perquirunt." *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*



where Cusanus (who in other places merely complains that Wenck evidently failed to read the work he is criticizing) actually quotes at length his own words from *De docta ignorantia*. That he felt quite exasperated with this particular charge is evident from the passionate language in which it is rebutted. In the words of the 'disciple':

I subsequently read, in turn, the fourth thesis. The teacher heard that in this thesis the Adversary claims it comes from *Learned Ignorance* that there is a single nature for the image and the exemplar. Whereupon the teacher cried out: "Far be it! Far be it! This is the detestable outrage of a shameless falsifier!" and seizing a copy of *Learned Ignorance*, he read from Book One, chapter eleven [...].<sup>161</sup>

However, the accusation which seems to cause Cusanus the most grief, and that which he spends the bulk of the *Apologia* redressing, is that learned ignorance is fundamentally anti-rational and entails the destruction of philosophy and theology. Cusanus thus provides a detailed rebuttal of Wenck's accusations that the coincidence of opposites destroys the foundation of science. He begins by showing how Wenck's insistence on the symbolic nature of all knowledge is not in any way incompatible with learned ignorance, but rather that the latter is an outgrowth of the former. In recognizing that every image falls short of the truth of its exemplar, Wenck has already gone part of the way to understanding learned ignorance, Cusanus says. For if, instead of stopping at the realization that God as absolute Exemplar is incomprehensible to us, Wenck had contemplated further, he would have realized that since God "shines forth" as the *ratio* of the multitude of images, then, if we remove this multitude, we will be left only with the form, or *ratio*, of intelligibility itself.<sup>162</sup> This

<sup>161</sup> "Et cum consequenter iterum legerem quartam conclusionem, et praeceptor audiret, quomodo adversarius in ea dicit ex Docta ignorantia haberi unam esse naturam imaginis et exemplaris, exclamavit praeceptor dicens: 'Absit, absit! Ecce detestandum facinus inverecundi falsarii!' Et arrepto codice Doctae ignorantie libro primo capitulo undecimo legit [...]." Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>162</sup> "Respexit hic vir [i.e., Wenck] ad speculum et aenigma, quasi Deus sit—uti est—incomprehensibilis. Veritas enim in imagine nequaquam, uti est, videri potest; cadit enim omnis imago eo, quia imago, a veritate sui exemplaris. Hinc visum est reprehensori incomprehensibilem non capi per transcendens incomprehensibiliter. Sed qui videt, quomodo imago est exemplaris imago, ille transiliendo imaginem, in se videt, quomodo imago est exemplaris imago, ille transiliendo imaginem ad incomprehensibilem veritatem incomprehensibiliter se convertit. Nam ille, qui omnem creaturam unius creatoris concipit imaginem, in se videt, quod, sicut imaginis esse penitus nihil perfectionis ex se habet, sic omnis sua perfectio est ab eo, cuius est imago; exemplar enim mensura et ratio est imaginis. Sic enim Deus relucet in creaturis sicut veritas in imagine." Ibid., p. 11.



is rationally incomprehensible—i.e., not positively graspable by reason—but may nevertheless be seen indirectly “by means of some incomprehensible glimpsing”.<sup>163</sup> Thus what Wenck regarded as a transgression of the limits of knowledge into some sort of mystical irrationalism is in fact the opposite: it is rather the understanding’s ascension to the *ratio* of its own intelligibility. Said otherwise, it is the recognition that God, as the truth of everything we know *per speculum et enigmatē*, is really the ultimate object of the intellect, who as such is both “maximally intelligible” and “unintelligible”.<sup>164</sup> What Cusanus is trying here to convey is that learned ignorance is in fact the necessary logical conclusion of Wenck’s own process of reasoning, and the unavoidable consequence of the fundamentally image-based nature of human understanding.

Although he would maintain that the above conclusion is evident based on a properly conducted process of reasoning alone, Cusanus, finding himself here on the defensive, seems anxious to anchor his doctrine in the authority of past sages (to show that it has been properly ‘tested’, so to speak), and so goes on to provide an account of how this may be found confirmed by the ancient authors. He explains that, while he himself had received the core notion of learned ignorance “as a gift of God” (i.e., in a mystical vision), he nevertheless later embarked on extensive book-study to see whether the same point “shines forth” in the works of the sages of old.<sup>165</sup> Amongst those authors to whom he appeals for support, Dionysius and Augustine of course loom large;<sup>166</sup> more atypically, he also appeals to Algazel.<sup>167</sup> Cusanus then indicates (*via* his ‘disciple’) that further examples

---

<sup>163</sup> “‘Qui igitur tantam videt rerum varietatem unius Dei esse imaginem, ille, dum linquit omnem omnium imaginum varietatem, incomprehensibiliter ad incomprehensibilem pergit.’” Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> “‘Sic Deus, qui est veritas, quod est obiectum intellectus, est maxime intelligibilis et ob suam superexcelsam intelligibilitatem est inintelligibilis. Unde sola docta ignorantia seu comprehensibilis incomprehensibilitas verior via manet ad ipsum transcendendi.’” Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> In fact, the ‘disciple’ poses this as a rhetorical question to his ‘master’, saying “‘Praecare praeceptor, quamvis nullo studio tibi advenerit consideratio, quam in Docta ignorantia aperuisti, sed Dei dono, tamen non dubium multos veterum sapientum quaesivisti, ut videres, si in omnibus idem reluceret.’” To which the master responds “‘Fateor, amice, non me Dionysium aut quemquam theologorum verorum tunc vidisse, quando desuper conceptum recepi; sed avido cursu me ad doctorum scripta contuli et nihil nisi revelatum varie figuratum inveni.’” Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> “‘Nam Dionysius ad Gaium ignorantiam perfectissimam scientiam affirmat et de scientia ignorantionis multis in locis loquitur; et Augustinus ait Deum potius ignorantia quam scientia attingi.’” Ibid., pp. 12–13.

<sup>167</sup> “‘Ita eleganter dixit Algazel in sua Metaphysica de Deo, quod “quisquis scit per probationem necessariam impossibilitatem suam apprehendendi eum, est cognitor et

confirming learned ignorance could be cited from the “common doctors” (*plebeios doctores*), but that to do so is unnecessary.<sup>168</sup>

The ‘conversation’ quickly moves on to the accusation that learned ignorance destroys “the fundamental principle of all knowledge” (referring to Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction) and with it, all inference. This is clearly a sore spot for Cusanus, who, a little further on, has his ‘disciple’ exclaim: “I cannot bear his comparing you to one who is ignorant of logic”.<sup>169</sup> His response is to say that Wenck has failed to distinguish between *ratio*: the domain of discursive reasoning, and *intellectus*: the higher, intellectual, domain in which the principles of reason are grounded:

For he [Wenck] fails to notice that learned ignorance is concerned with the mind’s eye and with intellectibility, so that whoever is led to the point of seeing ceases from all discursive reasoning, and his evidence comes from sight. [...] However, whoever pursues truth on the basis of evidence from hearing—even as we are quite commonly led by faith, which comes as a result of hearing—has need of inference. Hence if someone were to make the following statement, he would not be speaking at all accurately: “Since you say that the evidence from seeing is more certain because it proves apart from any rational consideration and any inference, then you are denying that the evidence from hearing and that all discursive reasoning are of any importance”.<sup>170</sup>

Here Cusanus neatly undercuts the force of Wenck’s argument by asserting that the latter has essentially made a category error. Learned ignorance does not entail any violation or destruction of Aristotelian principles, and therefore of inference, because it does not pertain to the rational domain in which these principles apply.

However, most interesting in the above passage is Cusanus’ association of reason with *hearing* and of the intellect with *seeing*. The latter

---

apprehensor, quoniam apprehendit scire ipsum a nullo posse comprehendi.” Etc. Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>169</sup> “Et ego [i.e., the ‘disciple’] patientiam praeceptoris admirans subintuli: ‘Impatienter fero, quod te comparat ignoranti logicam [...]’” Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>170</sup> “Non enim advertit doctam ignorantiam versari circa mentis oculum et intellectibilitatem; et hinc cessat ab omni ratiocinatione, qui ducitur ad visionem, et testimonium eius est de visu. [...] Opus autem habet discursu, qui per testimonium de auditu veritatem venatur,—sicuti communius ducimur per fidem, quae ex auditu est. Unde, si quis diceret: “Tu cum dicas testimonium de visu esse certius, quod sine omni argumento et discursu ostendit, igitur negas aliud esse testimonium de auditu et omnem ratiocinationem”, nequaquam bene diceret.” Ibid., p. 14.

half is familiar: because learned ignorance cannot be grasped in the normal way, it must rather be beheld, in a kind of intellectual vision. But that reason is associated with hearing is more intriguing—particularly as the latter is traditionally associated with faith. But this is precisely what Cusanus argues: namely, that reason *is* a kind of faith. This has to do with the inherent limitations of reason, which is “bound” by a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*.<sup>171</sup> These outer limits of reason are contradictories which, in the domain of reason, must remain separate. What Cusanus does not make explicit here but which is evident from *De docta ignorantia*, is that reason’s limitation to representing only that which does not violate the principle of non-contradiction means that reason is incapable of demonstrating its own truth, which is to say the *ratio* of reason itself—that by virtue of which all true inferences are true. And it is in precisely this sense that reason is faith: for the ultimate confirmation of the truth of inferences, reason must have faith in Truth itself. Reason thus corresponds to hearing in the sense of receiving its truth *indirectly*. Whereas the intellect has *direct* access to Truth itself through an immediate experience analogous to vision, to reason, one might say, Truth is always like a report one has heard—one which indeed seems undeniable (since its assumption permits the unfolding of rationally true arguments) although no one has ever actually *seen* it rationally. To experience the Truth of reason, one must therefore ascend to the domain of the intellect. This, again, is why discursive reason is in no conflict with the non-discursive, intellectual domain of learned ignorance, according to Cusanus: They stand in a complementary relationship.

Nevertheless it seems a certain amount of damage has been done to reason by this account—something which Cusanus does not acknowledge nor would it likely bother him, but which would perhaps still disturb Wenck, and not unjustly. For this complementary relationship between *ratio* and *intellectus* has somewhat blurred the line between faith and reason. It has purchased a direct vision of absolute Truth at the cost of the absolute truth of rational inferences; for it must be admitted, on this account, that the Truth of all correct inferences is something, ultimately, to which reason does not have access, and which it must therefore take on faith.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>172</sup> And furthermore, because the vision of that absolute Truth, *logos*, or Form of forms which guarantees the truth of inferences is Christ, according to Cusanus, the ability to persuade the infidel of the rationality of the Christian faith may still be in jeopardy; for

We have seen that, in the *Apologia*, Cusanus goes to great lengths to show that his doctrine of learned ignorance in no way destroys, or is even opposed to, Aristotelian logic or philosophy. At the same time, however, he is very openly and pointedly critical of the *Aristotelian tradition*—which he refers to as the “Aristotelian sect” (*Aristotelica secta*)<sup>173</sup>—as practiced at the universities by schoolmen like Johannes Wenck. The aspect of this sect of which he is most critical is its emphasis on *authority* and *tradition*; and it is largely due to this that Wenck, according to Cusanus, was unable to appreciate learned ignorance, for it blocks the way to mystical theology. Following his remarks regarding the necessity of withholding mystical theology from the “unlearned”, Cusanus writes (in the voice of the ‘master’):

They [i.e., the sages of antiquity] especially admonished [us] to beware lest a mystery be communicated to minds bound by the authority which long-standing custom possesses. For so great is the strength of long-established observance that many people’s lives are erased sooner than their customs, as we experience with regard to the persecution of the Jews, the Saracens, and other obdurate heretics who assert as a law—which they prefer to their lives—an opinion which has become established by prolonged acceptance. But the Aristotelian sect now prevails. This sect regards as heresy the coincidence of opposites, in whose admission is the beginning of the ascent in mystical theology. This way [*via*], which is completely tasteless to those nourished in this sect, is pushed far from them, as contrary to their practice. Hence, it would be like a miracle—just as it would be the transformation of the sect—for them to reject Aristotle and to leap higher.<sup>174</sup>

This stubborn adherence to tradition prevents those schooled in the Aristotelian sect from being able to consider the coincidence of opposites; however without its admission, one cannot rise from the domain of *ratio* to that of *intellectus*, as we have already seen.

---

it would appear to be guilty of a certain circular reasoning in which the Christian faith is argued to be true because Truth has been pre-defined as Christ. However, we will return to this subject later.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>174</sup> “Maxime autem cavendum monuerunt, ne secretum communicaretur ligatis mentibus per auctoritatem inveteratae consuetudinis. Nam tanta est vis longaevae observantiae, quod citius vita multorum evellitur quam consuetudo,—uti experimur in persecutione Iudaeorum, Sarracenorum et aliorum pertinacium haereticorum, qui opinionem usu temporis firmatam legem asserunt, quam vitae praeponunt. Unde, cum nunc Aristotelica secta praevaleat, quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam theologiam, in ea secta nutritis haec via penitus insipida quasi propositi contraria ab eis procul pellitur, ut sit miraculo simile—sicuti sectae mutatio—reiecto Aristotele eos altius transilire.” Ibid.

Furthermore, because the understanding acquired in mystical theology is *visual* in nature (as opposed to the knowledge acquired in scholastic theology, which is 'heard' from authorities and thus essentially taken on faith), it requires first-hand experience. The book- and authority-based theology practiced in the universities lacks the experiential and personal quality of mystical theology. Wenck is thus, according to Cusanus, like a blind man whose knowledge about the sun has come only from reports that he has *heard*; on the basis of this he believes that he knows something about the sun, when in fact he is ignorant. And so for all scholastic theology:

In this way he [Cusanus] likened to blind men very many of those who boast that they have knowledge of theology. For almost all who give themselves to the study of theology spend time with certain positive traditions and their forms; and when they know how to speak as do the others whom they have set up as their instructors, they think that they are theologians. They do not know that they are ignorant of that inaccessible Light in whom there is no darkness. By contrast, those who by means of learned ignorance are brought from hearing to mental sight rejoice at having attained, by more certain experience, a knowledge of their ignorance'.<sup>175</sup>

Unlike these highly-educated yet blind scholars, Cusanus writes, the man with sight knows that because the sun's brightness excels his power of vision, he has no real knowledge of it, and is therefore wiser by virtue of his learned ignorance.<sup>176</sup> This example is parallel to one we shall later encounter in the treatise *Idiota de sapientia*, where the academically-trained scholar is likened to a horse tied to a stall, who eats only what is placed before him.<sup>177</sup> Wenck cannot understand anything about mystical theology because he lacks experiential knowledge; he knows only what he has been "fed" and taken on authority.

---

<sup>175</sup> "Sic plerosque, qui se scientiam theologiae habere iactant, caecis comparavit. 'Versantur enim paene omnes, qui theologiae studio se conferunt, circa positivas quasdam traditiones et earum formas, et tunc se putant theologos esse, quando sic sciunt loqui uti alii, quos sibi constituerunt auctores; et non habent scientiam ignorantiae lucis illius inaccessibilis, in quo non sunt ullae tenebrae. Sed qui per doctam ignorantiam de auditu ad visum mentis transferuntur, illi certiori experimento scientiam ignorantiae se gaudent attigisse.'" Ibid., pp. 2–3.

<sup>176</sup> "Quasi scientia videntis ad scientiam caeci de solari claritate. Potest enim caecus aliquis multa audisse de solis claritate atque quod tanta sit, quod comprehendere nequeat, credens se per ea, quae sic audivit, scire aliqua de solis claritate, cuius tamen habet ignorantiam. Videns vero de solis claritate, quanta sit, interrogatus respondit se ignorare et huius ignorantiae scientiam habet, quia, cum lux solo visu attingatur, experitur solis claritatem visum excellere.'" Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> h *Idiota de sapientia*, p. 4.

The other aspect of scholastic theology, as represented by the “Aristotelian sect”, of which Cusanus is very critical in the *Apologia*, is its fundamentally *disputational* character. Cusanus repeatedly accuses Wenck in this treatise of wilfully misunderstanding him, of quoting his words out of context and seeking only to refute him. However this is, he says, typical of scholastic discourse. For while mystical theology leads the initiate to rest and silence (*vacatio et silentium*) in a vision of the invisible God, academic knowledge is disputational in nature and, inflated with pride, seeks only to win a “victory of words” over its opponent. Wenck, revealing the source and type of his own learning, sought only dispute and conflict in his approach to Cusanus’ text.<sup>178</sup> He has read *De docta ignorantia* only in order to confound the doctrine clearly expressed therein, and for that reason failed to understand it. In opposition to the disputational method, he asserts, one who examines another’s position on a certain topic ought to take care to read all his writings on that topic, and with a mind to finding the consistency in his position. “For from truncated writings it is easy to find something which by itself seems inconsistent but which when compared with the whole corpus is seen to be consistent”.<sup>179</sup> Thus mystical theology strives always for *unity*, whereas scholastic theology only creates *disunity* and division.

In the context of this rejection of the disputational, divisive character of theology as practiced by the “Aristotelian sect”, it thus becomes clearer why Cusanus chose to format his response to Wenck in this rather awkward manner, as a pseudo-*reportatio*/-dialogue in which his views are presented indirectly. For all the artificiality of the device, it nevertheless reflects Cusanus’ refusal to enter into debate with Wenck or to argue on the latter’s terms, which he feels belong to a tradition of theology opposed both in method and in principle to the practice of mystical theology. And, in contrast to Wenck’s criticisms in *De ignota litteratura*, which, as we saw, were often based on *ad hominem* attacks or association of Cusanus’ ideas

---

<sup>178</sup> “Nam mystica theologia ducit ad vacationem et silentium, ubi est visio, quae nobis conceditur, invisibilis Dei; scientia autem, quae est in exercitio ad confligendum, illa est, quae victoriam verborum expectat et inflatur, et longe abest ab illa, quae ad Deum, qui est pax nostra, properat. Unde, cum configere ex sua scientia proponat, qualis sit illa, occultare nequivit. Id enim, quod inflat et ad conflictum excitat, seipsum prodat: eam scilicet non esse scientiam, quae per vacationem in mentis visionem tendit, qualis est docta ignorantia.” h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>179</sup> “Oportet enim, qui scribentis in re aliqua mentem investigat, ut omnia scripta legat attente et in unam concordantem sententiam resolvat. Facile est enim ex truncatis scripturis aliquid reperiri, quod in se videtur dissonum; sed collatum ad integritatem voluminis est concordans [...]” Ibid., p. 17.

with condemned doctrines, in his *Apologia*, Cusanus defends himself for the most part philosophically, with reference to his writings and on the basis of arguments. Thus in his manner of rebuttal as well as through his specific positions, Cusanus makes manifest his wish to distance himself from the standard mode of scholastic discourse in his day.

At the end of the *Apologia*, Cusanus (in the person of the 'disciple') optimistically predicts that the way of learned ignorance "will surely conquer all the modes of reasoning of all the philosophers, although it is difficult to leave behind things to which we are accustomed".<sup>180</sup> Whether or not Cusanus really believed this cannot be judged, but it does reveal the extent to which he consciously opposed his own doctrines and methods to the scholastic, Aristotelian tradition. It is clear that he believed the pursuit of learned ignorance required the abandonment of this tradition. That this opinion not only still held, but was strengthened in the coming years, is made evident by the series of *Idiota* treatises, penned just prior to his legation journey through the Germanies. As we shall see, the Socratic persona adopted by Cusanus in the *Apologia* reappears there in the archetypal figure of the "*idiot*", or layman, who, by (re-)educating members of the academic establishment in the way of learned ignorance, personifies the victory over the old tradition which is predicted here. Because there are such obvious parallels between the aims and methods of the *Apologia* and those of the *Idiota* dialogues, the latter must be regarded as a continuation of the project begun in the first, as an ongoing rebuttal of Johannes Wenck in particular, and of the academic establishment in general.

### *The Idiota Dialogues as Further Response*

In 1450, while on holiday in Italy, Cusanus penned a trilogy of short works entitled *Idiota de sapientia* (*The Layman on Wisdom*), *Idiota de mente* (*The Layman on Mind*), and *Idiota de staticis experimentis* (*The Layman on Experiments Done with Weight-Scales*). Composed once more in the style of Platonic dialogues, what is most striking about these texts is the fact that in them Cusanus puts his doctrine of learned ignorance into the mouth of an *idiot*, or unschooled person. It quickly becomes clear from the doctrine espoused by this layman that he is simply a fictionalized representation of Cusanus himself; and, just as Cusanus had sought to compare his defense

---

<sup>180</sup> "Vincet enim indubie haec speculatio omnes omnium philosophorum ratiocinandi modos, licet difficile sit consueta relinquere." Ibid., p. 36.



against Wenck to that of Socrates' *apologia* before the court of Athens, here he portrays this *idiot*a very nobly, as a kind of Christian Socrates, gadfly to the pompous intelligentsia of his day, 'innocently' mocking their arrogant assumptions.<sup>181</sup>

While *De docta ignorantia* still retained certain elements of traditional academic discourse, such as an expository form of address and frequent references to philosophical and theological authorities, the *Idiota* treatises present essentially the same doctrine in an informal, dialogical literary style, without references to authorities, as a series of rational experiments aided only by everyday analogies.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the method which Cusanus opposed to scholastic theology in the *Apologia*, he seeks here positively to exemplify, as a demonstration of the *via doctae ignorantiae* 'in action', so to speak.<sup>183</sup> Cusanus was determined in these texts to show that "Wisdom proclaims itself openly in the streets" and that *idiot*a wisdom is indeed no inferior knowledge, but that which "dwells in the highest places".<sup>184</sup> Because God's books are written in everything in creation, it is not necessary to read the texts of scholastic authorities to learn about God. Cusanus wished thus to put wisdom in the hands of such 'idiotae', and even goes so far as to suggest that it belongs more rightly in their hands than in those of the people who have made it their profession.

However, these democratic-sounding sentiments require careful qualification. In the first place, it is clear, as said, that by the Socratic figure of the *idiot*a, Cusanus has in mind first and foremost *himself*—despite his being a highly-educated product of the university system of his day as well as an avid collector and reader of the books of philosophical and theological authorities. Furthermore, Cusanus' readership consisted primarily of

---

<sup>181</sup> The strong narrative and thematic continuity between the *Apologia* and the *Idiota* dialogues has been little remarked upon by other commentators, although Flasch notes in passing how the theme of "authority" as a target of attack recurs from the *Apologia* to *Idiota de sapientia* (Flasch [1998], p. 254).

<sup>182</sup> More precisely, the first of these dialogues, *Idiota de sapientia*, concerns an explication of the method of learned ignorance, particularly in relation to mystical theology; the second, *De mente*, applies this method to understanding the nature of the mind; the third in the series, *De staticis experimentis*, is somewhat different from the other two, in that it concerns a purely empirical investigation into the usefulness of weight-scales for obtaining information about a variety of physical phenomena. As our interest is more in the method of learned ignorance than in its concrete applications, we will here be concerned only with the first two dialogues.

<sup>183</sup> And, in this, the dramatization made possible by the narrative form of a fictional dialogue would certainly have assisted.

<sup>184</sup> "Idiota. [...] Ego autem tibi dico, quod sapientia foris clamat in plateis [Proverbs 1:20], et est clamor eius, quoniam ipsa habitat in altissimis." h *Idiota de sapientia*, pp. 4–5.



the also academically-trained and intellectually sophisticated monks of Tegernsee, who were likely the projected audience for these texts.<sup>185</sup> Thus it is certain that *idiotia* did not mean illiterate to Cusanus, nor was his layman likely to have represented any real ‘man in the street’ (or spoon-maker, as in *Idiotia de mente*), but rather more of a metaphorical one. As far as actual lay theology went (of which Cusanus was, as we have seen, a cautious supporter), there is no doubt that he believed their spiritual care was in need of close regulation by ecclesiastical authorities. What is perhaps surprising is Cusanus’ apparent lack of awareness that there might be any tension between the somewhat idealized account of lay theology he presents in these treatises and the actual practice of lay religion in late-medieval society (and in this respect, Wenck, for all his hyperbolic excesses, was perhaps more realistic about the potential threats of heresy and erosion of church authority). Cusanus seems rather naively to have believed that all that was required for the harmonious relation of Church and society was proper education, eradication of ecclesiastical abuses, and the strict regulation of devotional practices—giving no indication of having considered whether there might be any inherent conflict between lay spirituality and ecclesiastical authority. The rubric within which the *Idiotia* treatises unfold represents, as such, no implicit critique of social hierarchies, but is much more a metaphor for spiritual humility and intellectual independence, as part of a lesson which seems to have been aimed primarily at the re-education of learned clerics in a mode of intellectual enquiry which he felt was more suited to mystical theology.<sup>186</sup> However

---

<sup>185</sup> On the educational background of the Tegernsee brothers, as well as their reception of Cusanus’ texts, see sections below, “*Background of the debate: The University of Vienna and reform in Austria*” and “*Reception of Cusanus’ works in the monasteries, and the development of the debate*”.

<sup>186</sup> In this respect, it is notable that Cusanus expressed no interest in reforming the study of theology within the universities themselves, although he was very critical of the current state of scholastic theology, as evinced by his comments in the *Apologia*. He rather focused his reform of theology outside the universities, on the monasteries. It is not clear why; however, given his repeated statements about the danger of revealing mystical teachings to those incapable of appreciating them, it is possible that he simply chose to direct his efforts where he thought they were most likely to bear fruit. Certainly he did not feel that his approach to mystical theology was incompatible with academic, or ‘book’ study. He had himself pursued the study of theology for a short while at Köln under Heymericus de Campo (in 1425), but for reasons unknown did not attain a doctorate. There is no indication that this was a result of any particular dissatisfaction with the practice of academic theology at the universities, and it may simply have been that at the time the active life of a canon lawyer seemed a more attractive option. At any rate, Cusanus’ refusal on two occasions of a chair in canon law at the University of Leuven (in 1428 and 1435) indicates that he had resolutely left the university milieu behind. On Cusanus’ early life

before this lesson can unfold, the pretensions of scholastic discourse need first be exposed.

### Idiota de sapientia

The critique of academic learning in the *Idiota* treatises is colourfully represented by its characters: *Idiota de sapientia* opens with a “poor” layman confronting a “wealthy” orator in the Roman Forum. “Smiling” (*subridens*), the *idiot*a inquires of the orator, how it is that he is so full of pride, and has not been brought to a state of humility by his endless book-study. This pride can only result, he concludes, from the fact that the object of the orator’s study is not God—whose study can only make one humble—but in fact “the knowledge that pertains to this world”, which “inflates” one.<sup>187</sup> Immediately notable here is the parallel to Wenck’s criticism that knowledge which does not humbly respect its own limits “inflates” one, and his attack on Cusanus for thinking that knowledge can transcend its reliance on images received through the senses by seeking ‘unknowably’ to know things beyond creation. Cusanus turns Wenck’s own attack against him, saying that it is in fact knowledge of *this* world that “inflates” one’s pride, in giving a person the impression that he really knows something, when in fact such knowledge is, in the eyes of God but “a certain foolishness” (*stultitia quaedam*).<sup>188</sup>

The orator counters this remark by asking just what sort of presumption causes this poor and utterly ignorant *idiot*a to belittle written study, without which no one makes progress.<sup>189</sup> The layman responds that it is not presumption, but love, that prevents him from keeping silent; for he sees the orator engaged in much futile effort in his own search for wisdom. If he could help him see his error, the orator would surely rejoice, as though he had been saved from a grievous snare.<sup>190</sup> For the opinion of

---

and education, see, e.g., Meuthen, E. *Nikolaus von Kues 1401–1464. Skizze einer Biographie*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1979.

<sup>187</sup> “Miror de fastu tuo, quod, cum continua lectione defatigeris innumerabiles libros lectitando, nondum ad humilitatem ductus sis; hoc certe ex eo, quia scientia huius mundi, in qua te ceteros praecellere putas, stultitia quaedam est apud Deum et hinc inflat. Vera autem scientia humiliat.” h *Idiota de sapientia*, p. 3; re: 1 Cor. 3:19: “Sapientia enim huius mundi stultitia est apud Deum scriptum est enim comprehendam sapientes in astutia eorum.”

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>189</sup> “Orator. Quae est haec praesumptio tua, pauper idiot a et penitus ignorans, ut sic parvifacias studium litterarum, sine quo nemo proficit?” *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>190</sup> “Idiota. Non est, magne orator, praesumptio, quae me silere non sinit, sed caritas. Nam video te deditum ad quaerendum sapientiam multo casso labore, a quo te revocare

authorities, he says, rather than helping him, has held him back from wisdom, so that he is like a horse tied to a stall that eats only what is placed before it. Because the horse is by nature a wild animal, it is therefore by contrivance that it is so constrained, and its diet, thus fed, is “strange and unnatural”.<sup>191</sup> It is here noteworthy that the *idiot*a does not assert that book-learning is useless or produces no knowledge. For when the orator cleverly rejoins, “Where is the nourishment of wisdom, if not in the books of the wise?”, he responds that he did not say that there is *no* wisdom there, but only that such wisdom is “unnatural”.<sup>192</sup> It is unnatural, in that it is second-hand. “For those who first devoted themselves to writing about wisdom did not derive their growth from the nourishment of books, which did not yet exist”;<sup>193</sup> rather, they acquired their knowledge through personal experience, and for this reason their wisdom far excels that of men who only know what they have learned from books.<sup>194</sup>

The orator concedes that knowledge of some things may be acquired without the study of written works, but by no means of “great and difficult matters”, since science is the result of an accumulation of knowledge over time.<sup>195</sup> To this the *idiot*a however replies, “This is what I was saying, namely, that you are being led by authority and are deceived. Someone has written the word that you believe”.<sup>196</sup> The orator believes that scientific knowledge can only be acquired in this way because he was told so; in the absence of personal experience he has no way of judging for himself, and must therefore rely on what he has heard. Moreover, in believing the reports of other’s knowledge, the orator is led to believe that he is wise

---

si possem, ita ut et tu errorem perpenderes, puto contrito laqueo te evasisse gauderes.” Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> “Idiota. [...] Traxit te opinio auctoritatis, ut sis quasi equus natura liber, sed arte capistro alligatus praesepe, ubi non aliud comedit, nisi quod sibi ministratur. Pascitur enim intellectus tuus auctoritati scribentium constrictus pabulo alieno et non naturali.” Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> “Orator. Si non in libris sapientum est sapientiae pabulum: ubi tunc est?

Idiota. Non dico ibi non esse, sed dico naturale ibi non reperi.” Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> “Idiota. [...] Qui enim primo se ad scribendum de sapientia contulerunt, non de librorum pabulo, qui nondum erant [...]” Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> In this connection Cusanus does not only have in mind the Presocratic philosophers such as Pythagoras and Parmenides, as Flasch suggests (Flasch [1998], pp. 244–255), but also the Apostles and Church Fathers. They too acquired their wisdom “naturally”, i.e., through first-hand experience (h *Idiota de sapientia*, pp. 4, 17–18). Flasch seeks to drive a wedge between natural philosophy and theology which to Cusanus simply did not exist. Hopkins has also remarked on this tendency in Flasch: see Hopkins (2000), p. 81.

<sup>195</sup> “Orator. Quamvis forte sine litterarum studio aliqua sciri possint, tamen res difficiles et grandes nequaquam, cum scientiae creverint per additamenta.” h *Idiota de sapientia*, p. 4.

<sup>196</sup> “Idiota. Hoc est quod aiebam, scilicet te duci auctoritate et decipi: Scripsit aliquis verbum illud, cui credis.” Ibid.

even though none of the knowledge he possesses is his own, and therefore is made haughty; whereas if he had to rely upon his own resources, he would be humbled by the recognition of his ignorance.

The orator's interest has now been piqued, and he is keen to know how an *idiota*, by definition unlearned, can come to have knowledge of anything at all, even of his own ignorance. Their exchange goes as follows:

Orator: How are you able to be led to knowledge of your ignorance, when you are an *idiota*?

Idiota: Not from your books but from God's books.

Orator: Which ones are they?

Idiota: Those that he wrote with his finger.

Orator: Where are they found?

Idiota: Everywhere. [...]

Orator: I would like to hear how.

Idiota: If I saw that you were not motivated by curiosity, I would disclose important matters to you.<sup>197</sup>

The *idiota* is appropriately reluctant to discuss the way of learned ignorance with this academically-trained orator, whose motivation, he suspects, is little more than idle curiosity.<sup>198</sup> However, the orator asserts his eager desire to understand the layman, and the latter, apparently satisfied

---

<sup>197</sup> "Orator: Quomodo ductus esse potes ad scientiam ignorantiae tuae, cum sis idiota?

Idiota: Non ex tuis, sed ex Dei libris.

Orator: Qui sunt illi?

Idiota: Quos suo digito scripsit.

Orator: Ubi reperiuntur?

Idiota: Ubique.

[...]

Orator: Optarem audire quomodo.

Idiota: Si te absque curiosa inquisitione affectum conspicerem, magna tibi panderem." Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>198</sup> And the parallels between the character of the orator and Wenck, as he is portrayed by Cusanus in the *Apologia*, as well as the criticisms levelled against both, are so strikingly similar, that it is impossible that Cusanus did not have Wenck primarily in mind when creating this character. This I would posit against Flasch, who describes the orator as "einen rhetorisch ausgebildeten Beamten im Dienst eines Fürsten, oder einer Stadt, dessen Aufgabe es war, Staatsschreiben antikisierend zu stilisieren und bei feierlichen Anlässen Festreden zu halten. Seit dem 14. Jahrhundert hatte sich, von Italien ausgehend, das Bewußtsein verstärkt [...], mit elegantem Stil lasse sich Staatspropaganda wirksamer gestalten. Wir müssen uns also einen hohen Kanzleibeamten vorstellen, eine typische Figur des italienischen Quattrocento, einen Diplomaten und steinreichen Mann [...]" (Flasch [1998], p. 253). Indeed, apart from the reference to wealth, it is difficult to see whence Flasch draws this image, which has no source in the text, and seems to be a product of Flasch's conviction that Cusanus lived and worked in a milieu permeated with Italian humanism.

that the former is not simply curious to hear some strange new doctrine, proceeds to instruct him. The lesson, which is conducted from the comfort of a local barber-shop, takes its starting point from empirical observation of the activities of the tradesmen and merchants in the marketplace around them, who are busy weighing, counting, and measuring goods for sale. In this, Cusanus manifests his positive attitude towards sense data, and shows that learned ignorance is not at all a doctrine of worldly detachment, as Wenck had claimed.<sup>199</sup> Indeed, the busy marketplace setting of the Roman forum is in itself a symbolic rebuttal of Wenck's accusation that Cusanus is an advocate of the 'abgeschieden Leben'.<sup>200</sup>

Asking the orator what it is that all of these activities, or *opera rationis*, have in common, he correctly responds that it is the act of *discrimination* (*discretio*).<sup>201</sup> However, the *idiota* adds, we are only able to discriminate numerically—which is to say, to count (*numerare*)—by means of the *one*; and, similarly, all forms of measurement rely on a basic unit of measure.<sup>202</sup> Asked by means of what we are able to attain to these basic units of measure, the orator responds that it clearly cannot be through any of the things which they measure, for what is prior cannot be measured by what is subsequent. Based on this realization, the *idiota* is then easily able to lead the orator to see that the principle of all human mental activity cannot be grasped by the mind in any positive way, just as “the composite cannot measure the simple”; for “that by means of which, from which, and in reference to which everything measurable is measured is not attainable by means of measure”.<sup>203</sup> “I see this point clearly”, the orator avers.<sup>204</sup> Thus he is brought to knowledge of his own ignorance through this truth.

---

<sup>199</sup> This positive attitude towards sense-data is most evident in the third of the *Idiota* treatises, namely *Idiota de staticis experimentis*, in which the measurement of various substances with weight scales forms of basis of a discussion between the *idiota* and the orator. Cusanus' emphasis on and positive attitude towards sensory experience has been discussed by a number of commentators. Cf. for example, Flasch (1998), pp. 302–306 (chapter: “Der Geist in der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung”); also Moffitt Watts (1982), p. 29.

<sup>200</sup> Although in this respect, it is unlikely that the marketplace was what Wenck had in mind when he stressed the necessity of sensible images in the knowledge-process, and he would certainly have considered subversive and dangerous the notion of laymen philosophizing independently of traditional authorities on the basis of their everyday observations.

<sup>201</sup> *Idiota de sapientia*, p. 6.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>203</sup> “*Idiota*. [...] compositum non potest mensurare simplex [...]. [...] Ex quo habes, quomodo [...] id, per quod, ex quo et in quo omne mensurabile mensuratur, non est mensura attingibile.” *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>204</sup> “Orator. Hoc clare conspicio.” *Ibid.*

"Transfer unto the highest levels, where wisdom dwells, this proclamation of wisdom's in the streets," the *idiota* tells him, "and you will find vastly more delightful truths than in all of your ornate books".<sup>205</sup>

The *idiota* is depicted in this treatise as a "most unschooled man" who nevertheless, as an "instrument" of God, is able to "open the eyes" of the overly-educated orator—who previously perceived only difficulty and confusion in divine matters—such that he is able to behold "with wondrous ease" that wisdom which proclaims itself openly in the marketplace but goes unnoticed by those with their noses buried in books.<sup>206</sup> Based on a process of simple reasoning, which requires no academic training and relies on the opinions of no authorities, the orator is made to see that all of his knowledge is based on a fundamentally unknowable principle. It is perhaps because this truth is so simply attained through reason that the orator is readily willing to accept it. And here it should be pointed out that so far nothing controversial (in the sense of exceeding the dictates of conventional reason) has been asserted. Even those trained in the "Aristotelian sect" would certainly not deny that "the composite cannot measure the simple" (as the orator's quick acceptance of this fact is meant to demonstrate), and if the academics of Cusanus' time had not come to this conclusion on their own, the implication here is, it is only because they were too "blinded" by their rote-learning of the works of authorities to undertake the process of reasoning that would have led them to this inevitable conclusion. Cusanus' goal with this treatise is thus not simply to present a positive view of the *via doctae ignorantiae*, but more ambitiously, to show how even the most entrenched academics could be convinced of its superiority (and thus how that victory over the Aristotelian sect predicted in the *Apologia* is to be accomplished).

The next stage will take the orator beyond the domain of reason, to show him how it is possible, beyond knowledge of his ignorance, actually to grasp this "unattainable" principle of all knowledge, which is "supreme wisdom", unattainably.<sup>207</sup> This type of wisdom pertains to the *intellectus*, and its study belongs to the realm of mystical theology. Accordingly,

---

<sup>205</sup> "Hunc clamorem sapientiae in plateis transfer in altissima, ubi sapientia habitat, et multo delectabiliora reperies quam in omnibus ornatissimis voluminibus tuis." Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> At the end of *Idiota de sapientia*, the layman proclaims "Benedictus Deus, qui me imperitissimo homine tamquam qualicumque instrumento usus est, ut tibi oculos mentis aperiret ad intuendum ipsum mira facilitate modo [...]" Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

the *idiota* once more hesitates to proceed, saying “Unless you ask out of desire, I am prohibited from doing so, for the secrets of wisdom are not to be revealed indiscriminately to everyone”.<sup>208</sup> Like in the *Apologia*, mystical theology is here presented as an elevated wisdom dangerous for the ‘unlearned’. Part of its danger results from the fact that to those accustomed to conventional reasoning, the statements of mystical theology will sound “strange and discordant” and will often seem to “contradict themselves”.<sup>209</sup> Because of this an intense desire to understand is crucial; for only this will motivate the ‘unlearned’ to persist in a *via* which seems to confound ordinary reason. The orator therefore persuades the layman to continue only by convincing him of his *impassioned desire* to learn more about this ineffable wisdom. And it is notable in this regard that the majority of the remainder of the first half of *Idiota de sapientia* (which is comprised of two books) concerns the affective state required by the mystical disciple in order at all to proceed in learned ignorance.

But why is the orator suddenly so enthusiastic? What motivates this fervent desire? Particularly when the first conclusion of learned ignorance is that the cause and principle of all knowledge cannot be grasped by the understanding (which would appear to be a sceptical conclusion and epistemological dead-end), why would the understanding still strive for Truth? The answer to this, according to Cusanus, lies in the nature of this unknowability itself. For although Wisdom itself “is known in no other way than that it is higher than all knowledge and is unknowable”,<sup>210</sup> nevertheless at the same time Wisdom “shines forth in all things” and therefore “attracts us by means of a certain foretasting of its effects, so that we are brought to it with wondrous desire”.<sup>211</sup> Just as God is present in his creation, so is His Wisdom present in human knowledge: namely as a vestige, which Cusanus here refers to as a “foretaste” (*praegustatio*). Thus our very realization that the principle of knowledge is ungraspable by the

---

<sup>208</sup> “Idiota: Nisi ex affectu oraveris, prohibitus sum, ne faciam: nam secreta sapientiae non sunt omnibus passim aperienda.” Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>209</sup> When the *idiota* first says that “unattainable” wisdom may be attained “unattainably” (*attingitur inattingibile inattingibiliter*), the orator’s initial response is, unsurprisingly: “Mira dicis et absona.” Thus the layman responds: “Haec est causa, cur occulta non debent communicari omnibus, quia eis absona videntur quando panduntur. Admiraris me dixisse sibi contradicentia [...]” Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>210</sup> “Unde sapientia [...] non aliter scitur, quam quod ipsa est omni scientia altior et inscibilis [...]” Ibid., pp. 9–10.

<sup>211</sup> “[...] sapientia, cum in omnibus relucent, nos allicit ex quadam praegustatione effectuum, ut mirabili desiderio ad ipsam feramur.” Ibid., p. 12.



understanding is, according to Cusanus, a vestige, or “foretaste”, of that principle. For if there were no connection between the understanding and Wisdom, then the understanding would surely not seek the latter, “for nothing that is altogether unknown is sought after”.<sup>212</sup> Wisdom is thus not simply determined as unknowable by learned ignorance, but more specifically, it is unknowable *because* it is the principle of knowledge. Therefore what appears at first to be a sceptical conclusion is actually a “foretaste” of Wisdom, an intimation of the necessary connection between human knowledge and Wisdom, insofar as learned ignorance is the realization that Wisdom is the “life” of the understanding:

For it [wisdom] is the spiritual life of the intellect, which has within it a certain concreated foretaste, through which with great effort it seeks the source of its life; which without the foretaste it would neither seek nor know that it had found it, if it did find it. Hence it [the intellectual spirit] is moved towards it [wisdom] as toward its own life.<sup>213</sup>

Another way to look at the relation of the intellect to Wisdom, is as the relation of image to Exemplar. Because, the *idiota* explains, Wisdom is the principle and cause of the intellect, the latter bears a certain “conformity”, or likeness, to it. In this sense the intellect is a “living image” (*viva imago*) of Wisdom, whose very being alive produces a movement towards its exemplar. The understanding naturally seeks to “assimilate” itself to Wisdom, “for an image is not at rest except in that of which it is the image”.<sup>214</sup> Striving for wisdom is thus simply the living expression of intellectual life.

The ascent to Wisdom in mystical theology is furthermore desirable, according to Cusanus, because it is an inherently joyous experience. For although the understanding recognizes the unattainability of its object of desire, yet the more fully it comes to realize this unattainability, the more fully it comes to see the infinite and eternal nature of its own principle and source, which can only bring it joy and pleasure:

---

<sup>212</sup> “Idiota. [...] Nihil enim penitus incognitum appetitur.” Ibid., p. 15. Re. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book X, ch. 1 and 2.

<sup>213</sup> “Idiota. [...] Cum enim ipsa [sapientia] sit vita spiritualis intellectus, qui in se habet quandam connaturatam praegustationem, per quam tanto studio inquit fontem vitae suae, quem sine praegustatione non quaereret nec se repperisse sciret, si reperiret, hinc ad eam ut ad propriam vitam suam movetur.” h *Idiota de sapientia*, p. 12.

<sup>214</sup> “Non enim quietatur imago nisi in eo, cuius est imago [...]” Ibid., p. 17.



And when it [the intellectual spirit], while seeking its [own] life, is led to the point that it sees that its life is infinite, then the more it sees its own life to be immortal, the more it rejoices.<sup>215</sup>

Thus the very realization of the unattainability of Wisdom in learned ignorance increases the understanding's desire to strive for it. Whereas one might think that learned ignorance would be a state of frustration for the intellect, and knowledge of the unattainability of Wisdom despair,<sup>216</sup> to Cusanus it is rather the greatest joy and pleasure; for the more greatly one comes to realize the extent of one's ignorance, the more nearly one approaches his own eternal life and blessedness. In short, for Cusanus, to realize that you are ignorant is to realize that you are immortal in God. And even to experience the desire for immortal life, is to experience already, as a foretaste, Eternal Wisdom.

It is for this reason that, despite the 'deconstructive' aspect of learned ignorance, there is no genuinely sceptical moment in Cusan epistemology. Man is never in any danger of being abandoned by Truth in learned ignorance, because the very realization of the impossibility of grasping Truth is at once the realization that it is the inalienable "life" of his understanding. This fact is reflected in the consistently confident attitude of Cusanus in all of his writings regarding the possibility of finding true knowledge: despite his method of learned ignorance, the idea that this might be unattainable is never entertained by him as a real possibility. And in this respect Cusanus remains decidedly a medieval thinker, despite how some have attempted to characterize him. For example, Moffitt Watts, influenced by Cassirer's portrait of Cusanus as "the first modern thinker", misconstrues Cusanus' relation to scepticism by overemphasizing the "disjunctive" aspect of learned ignorance. According to her,

---

<sup>215</sup> "Idiota. [...] Et quando eo [spiritualis intellectus] ducitur vitam suam quaerens, ut eam infinitam vitam videat, tunc tanto plus gaudet, quanto suam vitam immortaliores conspicit." Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>216</sup> And Cusanus does recognize that genuine ignorance would be "interminable torment" to the intellect: "Et hic est cruciatus interminabilis: intellectuale esse habere et numquam intelligere." (Ibid., p. 14) But for him this kind of torment is only faced by "[...] hoc, qui non aliud sapientiam putant quam id, quod intellectu est comprehensibile [...]" (Ibid., p. 13), i.e., by academics like Wenck, who insist that the only knowledge is that based on sensible images. These men remain alienated from true wisdom, which is infinite, in having sought it misguidedly in a certain "limitable rest" (*finibilis quies*); and being thus "deceived", they find only "misery and death" (*aerumpna et mors*); for an intellect separated from the eternal Wisdom which is its source is more dead than alive: "Sic intellectus, ad omne aliud quam ad aeternae sapientiae pabulum conversus, se extra vitam quasi in tenebris ignorantiae involutum potius mortuum quam vivum reperiet." Ibid., p. 14.

Cusanus recognized that there is no guarantee, no way of irrefutably demonstrating that there is a direct or conjunctive relationship between thought and being. Man's descriptions of God may or may not have a correspondence to the actual mode of their existence, but in any case the mind is never substantially joined to the object of its contemplation.<sup>217</sup>

This is simply not the case, as the entire point of Cusanus' above discussion of *praegustatio* is precisely to establish that the mind *is* substantially and inalienably joined to the object of its contemplation.<sup>218</sup>

It is through such reflections as these that the *idiot*a succeeds in infusing the orator with a passionate desire to pursue mystical theology, and soon the orator, whose tone has become notably humbled and who has begun to adopt the layman's vocabulary and form of expression, is begging him to continue:

Orator: These [things] are undoubtedly loftier than I was hoping to hear from you. Please do not cease guiding me to the point where I may delightfully taste with you something of these most lofty theories [*theoriae*]. For I see that you never become weary of speaking about wisdom. Now, your not becoming weary, I suppose, results from Wisdom's exceeding deliciousness, which unless you tasted with an inner relishing, would not attract you so much.<sup>219</sup>

Now that the orator has been brought to a state of humility by his realization of learned ignorance, is inflamed with the requisite desire to learn, and has demonstrated a certain understanding of the "inner relishing" involved the search for Wisdom, he is ready to begin the study of mystical theology proper. Key to the pursuit of Wisdom in mystical theology, and that which distinguishes it most sharply from scholastic theology, according to Cusanus, is its emphasis on personal experience. As the *idiot*a explains:

<sup>217</sup> Cf. Watts (1982), pp. 224–225.

<sup>218</sup> Watt's interpretation is guided by her (also mistaken) determination that Cusanus is a nominalist: "[...] the fact remains that Cusanus was one of the earliest thinkers to understand deeply and develop comprehensively the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural implications of the idea that the human mind is its own world, that it functions independently of the divine and natural worlds, save through certain revealed and fabricated relationships" (ibid.)—by which "fabricated" relationships she is referring to the mind's creation of universals. This point is discussed in detail below; see section "On the subject of forms/universals".

<sup>219</sup> "Orator. Haec indubie altiora sunt, quam a te audire sperabam. Non cesses quaeso me illo ducere, ubi aliquid talium altissimarum theoriarum tecum tam dulciter quam suaviter degustem. Nam video te non satiari semper de illa sapientia loqui. Maxima autem, ut puto, dulcedo hoc agit, quam nisi interno gustu saperes, non te tantum alliceret." h *Idiot*a de sapientia, pp. 10–11.

[J]ust as all knowledge of the taste of a thing never tasted is empty and sterile until the sense of taste attains it, so too of that wisdom, which no one tastes through hearing but only he who receives it by means of inner tasting. He gives testimony not about things which he has heard, but [about what] he has tasted experientially within himself. [...] Wherefore for the seeker of eternal wisdom it does not suffice to know those things that are recited about it; rather it is necessary that after he has found where it is through the intellect, that he make it his own.<sup>220</sup>

And:

[...] you know that wisdom is not in the art of rhetoric or in large books, but in separation from these sensible things and in a turning towards the most simple and infinite form, and receiving that [wisdom] in a temple purged of all sin and clinging to it with fervent love until you are able to taste it and to see how delightful is that which is the delight of everything.<sup>221</sup>

Again we see the rejection of all second-hand knowledge, associated with 'hearing'. A true testimony cannot be about things heard, but only of those things personally experienced. This is in accord with the layman's earlier statement that he does not in any way condemn the wisdom transmitted by authorities, since they themselves recorded what they had learned through first-hand experience. Their testimonies were true, and in a similar way, each disciple of mystical theology must find Wisdom for himself, rather than relying on their accounts. This entails contemplation of the nature of Wisdom itself, which, because it is the unknowable principle of all human understanding, requires a "separation from all sensible things", i.e., a turning away from *fantasmata*. Hence, Cusanus would agree with Wenck, that in raising its consideration beyond sensible images, mystical theology in a sense departs from reason; but in opposition to him, he would maintain that the process is *preeminently* rational, in that it elevates contemplation to the higher level of the *intellectus*.

---

<sup>220</sup> "Idiota. [...] Sicut enim omnis sapientia de gustu rei numquam gustatae vacua et sterilis est, quousque sensus gustus attingat, ita de hac sapientia, quam nemo gustat per auditum, sed solum ille, qui eam accipit in interno gustu. Ille perhibet testimonium non de hiis, quae audivit, sed in seipso experimentaliter gustavit. [...] Quapropter ad quaerentem aeternam sapientiam non sufficit scire ea, quae de ipsa leguntur, sed necesse est, quod postquam intellectu repperit ubi est, quod eam suam faciat." Ibid., pp. 17–18.

<sup>221</sup> "Idiota. [...] scias sapientiam esse non in arte oratoria aut in voluminibus magnis, sed in separatione ab istis sensibilibus ac in conversione ad simplicissimam et infinitam formam et illam recipere in templo purgato ab omni vitio et fervido amore ei inhaerere, quousque gustare eam queas et videre, quam suavis sit illa, quae est omnis suavitas." Ibid., p. 23.

What is perhaps most interesting about this account, however, is how it seems to leave little room for faith. Desire, love, and moral purity all play a role,<sup>222</sup> but faith is hardly mentioned in *Idiota de sapientia*, and the disavowal of knowledge obtained through the accounts of others would seem to leave no place for the authority of Scripture. Cusanus has defended his doctrine of learned ignorance against accusations of irrationalism by presenting it as—we might say—a *hyper-rational* account of mystical theology. Curiously, however, although it was entirely left out of account in this dialogue, faith is one of the first topics to be mentioned in its sequel, namely, the *Idiota de mente*. In fact, it emerges only briefly in a dialogue which is otherwise given over to lengthy philosophical discussion of various questions concerning the nature of mind. But as we shall see, the very way in which faith is explicitly brought up and then quickly dropped provides significant insight into its role in the whole enterprise.

#### Idiota de mente

By *De mente*, the polemical tone has somewhat abated. The setting and characters remain the same, with the addition of the figure of “the philosopher”. This philosopher is characterized as being “foremost among all those philosophers now alive”,<sup>223</sup> and as a “Peripatetic” who has continually travelled throughout the world seeking knowledge.<sup>224</sup> He is pale of face, wears a long toga, and has “the serious demeanor of a thoughtful man”.<sup>225</sup> Immediately notable is the much more positive light in which this new character is cast. In contrast to the orator at the beginning of *Idiota de sapientia*, the philosopher is modest and circumspect, admits without hesitation the shortcomings of his own knowledge, and in no way looks down on the *idiotia*. The orator, although by this time much reformed and an avid follower of the layman’s wisdom, is nonetheless embarrassed when he brings the philosopher to meet the *idiotia*, only to find him engaged in the mundane craft of spoonmaking. The unapologetic layman

---

<sup>222</sup> And these, it must be said, only in the context of the intellect. For as we have seen, the desire spoken of here is an essentially intellectual desire (the intellect’s natural desire to know, its striving for its origin, Wisdom), love is the intellect’s love of wisdom, and even moral purity refers primarily to the intellect’s being free from errors which would interfere with its natural operation.

<sup>223</sup> “[...] philosophum omnium, qui nunc vitam agunt, praecipuum [...]” h *Idiota de mente*, p. 45.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>225</sup> “[...] cogitabundi viri gravitatem praesignantibus [...]” Ibid., p. 45.

is however received without prejudice by the philosopher, who remarks that even Plato occasionally painted and used examples from painting in his philosophy, demonstrating that there is no conflict between manual labour and speculative thought.<sup>226</sup>

With his antique stylings, this sober, toga-clad Peripatetic seems intended to represent a return to a 'truer' philosophical tradition and purer spirit of enquiry, in contrast to the figure of the orator, who represents the "Aristotelica secta" of the universities.<sup>227</sup> Accordingly, the orator shows great respect for the philosopher, whom he greets with deference, as he putatively represents one of those great authorities to whom the orator has devoted so much laborious study in the past. And in accordance with *Idiota de sapientia*, where the works of authorities themselves were never attacked, but only the mode of education which relied exclusively on their study, the philosopher, as one of those authorities who acquired his own knowledge through first-hand experience, is presented very positively.

The setting of *De mente* is once again Rome, but this time more specifically during the Jubilee celebrations of 1450 inaugurated by Nicholas V. The text opens with the orator coming upon the philosopher, who is standing on a bridge marveling at the throngs of pilgrims flocking into the city. When questioned by the orator as to the source of his amazement, the philosopher replies:

[...] when I observe the countless people, from nearly all regions of the world [...] I am amazed at the single faith of them all—a faith present in so great a diversity of bodies. For although no one can be like another, nevertheless it is the one faith of all that has summoned them in such devotion from the ends of the earth.<sup>228</sup>

---

<sup>226</sup> "Philosophus. [...] Nam et Plato inter ceteros pinxisse legitur, quod nequaquam fecisse creditur, nisi quia speculationi non adversabatur." Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>227</sup> Flasch considered both of these characters to be equal objects of criticism in *De mente* (Cf. Flasch (1998), p. 271). I would argue that the text reveals a much more positive portrayal of the philosopher, although he is still subordinate in wisdom to the *idiot*. For one thing, although the philosopher takes instruction from the layman, he is never subjected to the kind of dressing-down that the orator receives at the beginning of *De sapientia*; furthermore, the orator himself clearly defers in an obsequious manner to the philosopher, and is reduced to the role of a silent hanger-on in the text, once the conversation between the other two begins. If anything, the philosopher represents the reverence in which Cusanus held the ancient philosophers, whose wisdom erred only in that they lacked the truth of Christian Revelation.

<sup>228</sup> "Philosophus: [...]. Nam cum ex universis paene climatibus magna cum presura innumerabiles populos transire conspiciam, admiror omnium fidem unam in tanta

As is very characteristic of Cusanus, the focus here is on the dialectic between *unity* and *plurality*: That which so amazes the philosopher is how a single, unifying faith is reflected in such a diversity of persons. How can this be, he wonders? As is already hinted at by his statement that the one faith has somehow “summoned” all of them to converge on their spiritual capital, the answer will have to do with faith existing as a sort of innate faculty of the mind.

In response to the above statement of the philosopher, the orator says:

Certainly, it must be a gift of God that *idiotae* attain more clearly by faith that which philosophers do by reason. For you know how much investigation is required by one rationally investigating the immortality of the mind, which nevertheless no one of all these [*idiotae*] does not have indubitably through faith alone.<sup>229</sup>

To which the philosopher responds:

You relate a great and true thing, friend. For in continually travelling throughout the world I have consulted the wise in order to learn more about the immortality of the mind. [...] But what I have so far sought I still have not attained so perfectly by clear reasoning as these ignorant people have by faith.<sup>230</sup>

What is clearly taken as given by both, is the existence in all these people of a single faith: It is evident that they all share one faith, from the visible fact that they are all converging on Rome. In other words, based on empirical observation of the behaviour of a diversity of bodies, a unity amongst them may be inferred. More curious is the further inference made by both, that laypeople (*idiotae*) are capable more easily and quickly of grasping the immortal nature of the mind than are those who pursue the study of the mind through rational enquiry. At this point it is unclear why they would say such a thing, unless it were just to say that, as *idiotae*, they are credulous, and believe in the immortality of the mind based on

---

corporum diversitate. Cum enim nullus alteri similis esse possit, una tamen omnium fides est, quae eos tanta devotione de finibus orbis advexit.” h *Idiota de mente*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>229</sup> “Orator: Certe Dei donum esse necesse est idiotas clarius fide attingere quam philosophos ratione. Nam tu nosti, quanta inquisitione opus habet mentis immortalitatem ratione pertractans, quam tamen nemo ex hiis omnibus sola fide pro indubitata non habet [...]” Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>230</sup> “Philosophus: [...] Magnam rem et veram narras, amice! Ego enim omni tempore mundum peragrans sapientes adii, ut de mentis immortalitate certior fierem [...]. [...] sed hactenus nondum quaesitum adeo perfecte ac lucida ratione attigi quemadmodum hic ignorans populus fide.” Ibid., p. 46.

reports they have heard, or because they have been instructed to believe so by authorities.

However it is evident from *Idiota de sapientia* that by *idiotia* Cusanus does not mean ignorant in the common sense, and it has furthermore been established by his extensive criticism of knowledge based on reports heard from others, i.e., taken on authority, that the kind of faith here being attributed to laypeople cannot be mere credulity or obedience to authoritative accounts. It must rather, somehow, concern first-hand experience. But how? And if their knowledge of the immortality of the mind *is* the result of some kind of direct experience, then in what sense can this even be called faith? However the matter of faith, so pointedly brought up at the start of this treatise, is just as quickly dropped, not to be mentioned again until the layman's concluding remarks at the end of the text.

In order to understand what all of this means, certain things must be pointed out. First, because the orator and philosopher have asserted that laypeople have a simpler and more direct access through faith to knowledge of the immortality of the mind than scholars like themselves do through rational enquiry, it is to be expected that their subsequent discussion with the layman about the nature of mind will manifest this; i.e., that the *idiotia's* treatment of the subject of mind will be a demonstration of his faith and of how this led him to know that the mind is immortal. Appropriately, the subject of the mind's immortality is not in fact discussed until the last chapter of the treatise (Chapter 15), and forms the final stage of enquiry into the nature of mind. Only once this subject has been tackled, does the issue of faith once again re-emerge in the discussion.

From these facts it may be inferred that faith "disappears" from the main body of the treatise only because it is the implicit subject of the entire discussion; and, in this sense, the investigation into the nature of mind is in fact a protracted response to the initial question about the unity of faith in a plurality of men.<sup>231</sup> Cusanus' explanation of how the mind works is thus at once his explanation of faith, what it is, and how it functions. Accordingly, faith reappears in the layman's closing remarks, as "innate religion" (*connata religio*):

---

<sup>231</sup> Flasch wrote that *Idiota de mente* had much more to do with "mens-Philosophie" and "Zahlentheorie" than theology (cf. Flasch [1998], p. 275); however, it is evident from the construction as well as the contents of this treatise that Cusanus' 'philosophy of mind' is profoundly theological.



Innate religion—which has led these countless people this year to Rome and you, a philosopher, unto intense wonderment, which has always been apparent in the world in a diversity of modes—shows the immortality of our mind to be naturally imparted to us, so that the immortality of our mind would thus be known to us from the common, undisputed assertion of all men [...].<sup>232</sup>

What was thus implied at the beginning of the dialogue, in the philosopher's statement that faith had somehow "summoned" all of these diverse peoples to Rome, is here explicitly stated: faith is *innate religion*, it is nothing less than the structure of the mind. This innate religion is moreover unfolded in the world in a variety of observable modes—such as the observation of thousands of pilgrims instinctively drawn to their spiritual capital. And the human mind was formed in this manner so that it would be able easily to discover its own immortality, which would be sensed intuitively by all men. A further implication of this last fact is that men are naturally drawn towards unity, and thus that simple reflection on the mind's structure is all that is needed to make this essential unity apparent. What Cusanus wishes to express through this is that unity is the essential condition of man, towards which he naturally converges. Strife and division are always unnatural movements. He regards the spectacle provided by the Jubilee pilgrimages of 1450 to be visible confirmation of this fact.

Faith is thus shown, in *Idiota de mente*, to be an intuition of the mind's own structure, which may be subsequently confirmed by empirical observation of everyday human phenomena.<sup>233</sup> It is in the form of an intellectual intuition that *idiotae* have direct and immediate knowledge of what scholars learn only slowly and with great effort through reason. Because they possess this natural intuition, when they look around them they see

---

<sup>232</sup> "Connata religio, quae hunc innumerabilem populum in hoc anno Romam et te philosophum in vehementem admirationem adduxit, quae semper in mundo in modorum diversitate apparuit, nobis esse naturaliter inditam nostrae mentis immortalitatem ostendit, ut ita nobis nota sit nostrae mentis immortalitas ex communi omnium indubitata assertione [...]." Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>233</sup> This connection between faith and mind in *Idiota de mente* is one which, to my knowledge, has not been pointed out by other commentators. Flasch seems to miss this connection when he discusses the significance of *connata religio* (cf. Flasch [1998], pp. 312–317 [in Chapter 14. "Mentalmetaphysik als Trinitätsphilosophie"]). Furthermore, while it is true that the treatment of faith in *Idiota de mente* is more abstract than that in previous treatises and contains no discussion of the Incarnation, there is nothing in this account to support Flasch's claim: "Dennoch hat sich etwas verändert in der intellektuellen Arbeit des Cusanus an den Inhalten des christlichen Glaubens" (ibid., p. 313). There is nothing in *Idiota de mente* concerning faith or religion which conflicts with or represents a departure from what was established in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*.



the truth of their faith confirmed in everything they see. Everywhere they look, they see the unity binding all things together. On the contrary, scholars, who have become blind to this intuition through years of stubborn adherence to tradition and authority, perceive only diversity and confusion when they look around them. They lack that insight into the inherent binding principle of all things which Cusanus here calls faith.

Faith as an intuition of the mind's structure is an *implicit* experience: it is enfolded truth. And it is for this reason also that faith disappears from *Idiota de mente* almost as soon as it is mentioned; for faith *qua* faith can be asserted but not explicated: it is not in the nature of faith to be *explicit*. What therefore fills the pages of this treatise is something other than, though not incompatible with, faith. Accordingly, the chapters of this treatise are comprised of investigations into the mind's various operations. The specifics of these investigations are not of interest to us here so much as the nature of the investigation as a whole: How are these investigations related to the discovery of the mind's immortality, and how do they differ from the sort of rational investigations that the philosopher is accustomed to performing? In other words, what is the specific nature of the *idiotia* science represented by these investigations? And why is such a science even necessary for *idiotae*, who anyway possess this truth immediately as an intuition; what useful purpose does it serve?

We may begin to answer these questions by considering the relation between *De sapientia* and *De mente*. The purpose of *De sapientia* was to show how an entrenched academic can be brought to see the truth of learned ignorance and thus to begin to ascend in mystical theology. In *De mente*, the philosopher is also taught by the layman, but unlike the orator, he is from the outset an enthusiastic student. The philosopher is found at the start of the treatise in a state of amazement (*admiratio*). Amazement, or wonder, is not-knowing, and is identified by the orator as "a stimulus for all those who are seeking to know a given thing".<sup>234</sup> The philosopher is great in proportion to his capacity for wonder, which is akin to a state of learned ignorance. Whereas the orator, at the beginning of *De sapientia*, was complacently certain of his own knowledge, the philosopher is fully aware that he does not know. And, unlike the orator, whose pretensions had to be taken apart by the *idiotia* before they could even begin to discuss

---

<sup>234</sup> "Orator. Admiratio stimulus videtur esse omnium quamcumque rem scire quaerentium." h *Idiota de mente*, p. 45.

the nature of wisdom, the philosopher and the *idiota* can proceed immediately to an investigation of the nature of the mind.

But what does the layman give the philosopher that he didn't already have? The philosopher and the layman share the same epistemological goal: namely, to understand the nature of the mind and how it is united with God. But the philosopher has so far sought to grasp this through reason alone, and therefore has attained it "less perfectly" than have laypeople through faith. He still seeks wisdom in books, and states that he has come to Rome to seek ancient writings on the mind.<sup>235</sup> The orator tells him that unfortunately these writings are probably no longer extant, and refers him instead to the layman for instruction in this matter.<sup>236</sup> The message here is that books are corruptible and easily lost, but the wisdom contained within them is eternal, insofar as it derived from the immortal minds of men; and thus it is better sought at the source, namely, in the mind itself. However the philosopher, though open-minded about this proposed manner of enquiry, doesn't know how to proceed. As he is, he says, accustomed to inquiring into philosophical issues by discussing with wise men their interpretations of written texts, he has no idea what sort of questions to pose to the *idiota*.<sup>237</sup> The philosopher's manner of learning is thus cut off both from the world of everyday experience and from inward reflection. Without the guidance of authoritative texts, he is lost.

The layman therefore shows the philosopher how one can proceed without books. The fact that it was stated at the outset that *idiotae* attain more easily through faith what the learned learn only with difficulty through reason implies that the philosopher has somehow lost contact with his *connata religio*, or inner intuition of faith. As such the layman cannot very well proceed to instruct him by reference to faith, but must rather,

---

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>236</sup> The philosopher states that he has come to Rome to seek a temple dedicated to Mind by T. Attilius Crassus, where he has heard there are many writings by wise men on the topic of mind. The orator however informs him that these books are probably no longer to be found: "Philosophus. Audiveram ex templo Menti per T. Attilium Crassum in Capitolio dedicato multas sapientum de mente scripturas hoc loco reperiri [...]. Orator. Templum Menti dedicasse Crassum illum certum est; sed an de mente in eo templo libri et qui fuerint, nemo post tot Romanas clades scribere poterit. Verum ne doleas frustra advenisse, hominem idiotam meo iudicio admirandum, de qua re volueris, audies." Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>237</sup> "Philosophus. Est mea consuetudo, cum hominem fama sapientem accedo, de hiis, quae me angunt, in primis sollicitum esse et scripturas in medium conferre et inquirere earundem intellectum. Sed cum tu sis idiota, ignoro, quomodo te ad dicendum excitem, ut, quam habeas de mente intelligentiam, experiar." Ibid., p. 47.

through some manner of reasoning, lead him back *to* that intuition. The *idiota* explains that his method proceeds from observable phenomena—in this case, the craft of spoonmaking, through which he inquires symbolically (*symbolice*) into various matters.<sup>238</sup> In short, that method by which the *idiota* instructs the philosopher is neither the authority-based learning of the philosopher nor the faith-based intuition forgotten by scholars but natural to *idiotae*, but rather takes as its starting point concrete, sensible phenomena equally graspable by all. For the philosopher, this method provides the means to lead him back to recognition of his *connata religio*. For *idiotae*, who already possess a clear awareness of this, it provides the means for strengthening their faith and increasing their wonderment and desire. Both benefit from the process.

There is a further reason, however, for both to undertake such a process of enquiry; namely, that to do so is pre-eminently *human*. For when the philosopher asks the layman whether he has any conjectures about the nature of mind, the *idiota* replies, “I suppose that no one is or has been a complete man (*homo perfectus*), who has not formed at least some concept of mind”.<sup>239</sup> The ability to form concepts is that which separates men from beasts, and therefore to exercise that ability is the fulfilment of human nature. As such, the *idiota* is able easily to reply to the philosopher—who is somewhat sceptical that one so unschooled would have developed a concept of mind—that, indeed, even he has one. This is, namely, that mind is “that from which is the boundary (*terminus*) and measure of all things”, which he furthermore sees reflected in the name ‘mind’ (*mens*) itself, which takes its name from measuring (*mensurare*).<sup>240</sup> How the exercise of this most human faculty is connected to *connata religio* will emerge in the course of the discussion. It begins with some reflections on the nature of names.

When the philosopher asks the *idiota* to explain why he thinks that mind takes its name from measuring (a view, he says, that he has not found confirmed by any other author), the latter seeks to justify this by embarking upon a long excursus on the nature of the meaning of a name,

---

<sup>238</sup> It is notable that the orator, while present throughout the dialogue, plays no real role in the discussion that comprises *Idiota de mente*. In fact, having introduced the philosopher to the *idiota*, it seems he has served his function, and is at that point instructed by the philosopher to sit still, be quiet, and not interfere. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>239</sup> “Idiota. Puto neminem esse aut fuisse hominem perfectum, qui non de mente aliqualem saltem fecerit conceptum.” *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> “Habeo quidem et ego [i.e., conceptum de mente]: mentem esse, ex qua omnium rerum terminus et mensura. Mentem quidem a mensurando dici conicio.” *Ibid.*

which is really a discussion of the nature of universals. Names, the layman asserts, are imposed by reason; for we assign a name to something for one reason and another name to another thing for a different reason. And from the fact that different languages have different names for the same thing and that some of these names are more suitable than others, he says, it is evident that the suitability of names admits of more and less, and thus that the precise (i.e., perfectly suitable) name of a thing is not known.<sup>241</sup> However, this does not mean that the relation of names to things is merely an arbitrary function of the reason's operation. For although the imposition of a name is itself arbitrary, names are nevertheless united to things "by virtue of the fact that form has come to matter", and thus in this respect are eternal and "fitting".<sup>242</sup>

The *idiot* then seeks to elucidate the matter through an analogy to the art of spoonmaking. "A spoon", he explains, "has no other exemplar except our mind's idea".<sup>243</sup> Being a man-made object, there is no exemplar in nature which an artisan can imitate, as an artist would, for example, imitate a tree. As such, the nature of spoonness is not attainable by any of the senses; and yet there is a distinctive form-of-spoonness by virtue of which all spoons are spoons. And were one to hollow out a piece of wood in a certain way, the *idiot* explains, the form of spoonness "would shine forth fittingly" (*convenienter resplendeat*).<sup>244</sup> It is furthermore evident that there are an infinite variety of objects in which spoonness could be recognized, and therefore, he explains, that no one spoon perfectly embodies spoonness, but each only imprecisely and to a greater or lesser degree.<sup>245</sup> Now, the imposition of the name 'spoon' to any one of these objects is indeed arbitrary, since a different name could have been used (and indeed is used, in other languages) to describe them. However that by virtue of which they are all designated 'spoon'—i.e., the form of 'spoonness'—is not arbitrary.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>242</sup> "Nam etsi fatear omne vocabulum eo ipso unitum, quo forma materiae advenit, et verum sit formam adducere vocabulum, ut sic vocabula sint non ex impositione, sed ab aeterno, et impositio sit libera, tamen non arbitror aliud quam congruum nomen imponi [...]." Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>243</sup> "Coclear extra mentis nostrae ideam aliud non habet exemplar." Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>244</sup> "Unde materiam puta lignum per instrumentorum meorum, quae applico, varium motum, dolo et cavo, quousque in eo proportio debita oriatur, in qua forma coclearitatis convenienter resplendeat [...]." Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>245</sup> "Et in omnibus coclearibus non nisi ipsa simplicissima forma varie relucet, magis in uno et minus in alio et in nullo praecise." Ibid.

With respect to names, the *idiota* continues, it is thus clear that there is an arbitrary name which occurs by the operation of reason, and a “natural name” that is united to the form and is that by virtue of which the arbitrary name is imposed.<sup>246</sup> Thus, while the name imposed by reason may be arbitrary, the imposition itself is not. Furthermore, because the arbitrary name ‘spoon’ is imposed by virtue of the operation of reason (which possesses only what is received through the senses), it is clear that it can perish.<sup>247</sup> If every man who ever conceived of the name ‘spoon’ were to die, the arbitrary name ‘spoon’ would also cease to exist. However the ‘natural’ name, which is to say the form of spoonness, would not, for it is not perceptible nor found in any perceptible spoon, but is rather that by virtue of which the reason was able to impose the name ‘spoon’ upon an object.<sup>248</sup> Because it is independent of matter, this form is eternal and immutable (although until a material spoon existed, it would not be known by anyone).<sup>249</sup> Hence, those who admit, according to the *idiota*, that in the mind’s intellect are “the exemplifying and incommunicable true nature of the forms that shine forth in perceptible things”, understand that these forms must precede perceptible things, just as an original precedes its image.<sup>250</sup> The ‘arbitrary’ name ‘spoon’ is therefore an image of the ‘natural’ name, or imperceptible form of ‘spoonness’.

The *idiota* pointedly remarks that this investigation would be “pleasing” to those who believe that there can be nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses, that one makes inferences only through the operation of the reason, and that forms do not exist as separate from matter

---

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> And in this respect, he writes, both specific and generic forms, insofar as they are “captured by a name” are constructions of the reason based upon sensible objects: i.e., have no extra-mental existence: “Impositio [...] vocabuli sit motu rationis. Nam motus rationis est circa res, quae sub sensu cadunt, quarum discretionem, concordantiam et differentiam ratio facit, ut nihil sit in ratione, quod prius non fuit in sensu. [...] [G]enera et species, ut sub vocabulo cadunt, sunt entia rationis, quae sibi ratio fecit ex concordantia et differentia sensibilibus. Quare, cum sint posterius natura rebus sensibilibus, quarum sunt similitudines, tunc sensibilibus destructis remanere nequeunt.” Ibid., pp. 52–53.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>249</sup> This account is consistent with the discussion of universals in *De docta ignorantia* (discussed below in the section “On the subject of forms/universals”), although here Cusanus stops short of saying that universals *exist* only in particulars, saying merely that they cannot be *known* except as concretely instantiated in sensibly perceptible particulars.

<sup>250</sup> “Qui vero in mentis intelligentia aliquid esse admittunt, quod non fuit in sensu nec in ratione, puta exemplarem et incommunicabilem veritatem formarum, quae in sensibilibus relucet, hii dicunt exemplaria natura praecedere sensibilia, sicut veritas imaginem.” *Idiota de mente*, p. 53.

or otherwise than as entities of reason. On the other hand, those who believe that there is something in the intellect that derives neither from the senses nor from reason would assert that there are forms which have an extra-mental existence; that, for example, the form 'humanity', by which all men are men, would not cease to exist if men no longer existed, for "the true nature continues to exist in and of itself after its image is destroyed."<sup>251</sup> However, both groups, he maintains, deny that a thing is nothing more than what is captured by its name; and, knowing that names pertain only to what can be investigated logically or rationally, they attempt also to view things theologically, and in so doing, turn their attention towards Exemplars and Ideas.<sup>252</sup> In this way, Cusanus thus seeks to present a realist approach to universals in a way that would be palatable to nominalists.

While the *idiota* presents all of this as though naïve of the traditions he is representing, the saavy philosopher exclaims, "You touch marvelously upon all the schools of all the Peripatetic and of all the Academic philosophers."<sup>253</sup> And indeed it is clear that these two differing positions are intended to encapsulate the Aristotelian and Platonic views on forms. The purpose of this is made clear by the *idiota*'s next words: "All these [...] different modes are very easily reconciled and harmonized when the mind elevates itself unto infinity."<sup>254</sup> The layman, by reflecting on the nature of names, and with the assistance of an analogy based on his trade, has on his own managed not only to discover everything about the nature of the existence of forms, or universals, that Plato and Aristotle discovered, but has furthermore managed to reconcile both views.<sup>255</sup>

This "elevation unto infinity" consists of the realization that "there is only one, most simple Infinite Form, which in all things shines forth as the most adequate Exemplar of each and every formable thing".<sup>256</sup> Because no one can attain to this Infinite Form by reason, it is clear that all names imposed by reason, insofar as they "capture" a thing, are images of this "ineffable and adequate" Exemplar, which is moreover the ineffable

<sup>251</sup> "Unde imagine destructa manet in se veritas." Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> "Mirabiliter omnes omnium tangis philosophorum sectas, Peripateticorum et Academicorum." Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> "Hac omnes [...] modorum differentiae facillime resolvuntur et concordantur, quando mens se ad infinitatem elevat." Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> And in Chapter 3, the philosopher re-emphasizes this, saying, "Miram doctrinam tradidisti, idiota, omnes philosophos concordandi." Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>256</sup> "[...] infinita forma est solum una et simplicissima, quae in omnibus rebus resplendet tamquam omnium et singulorum formabilium adequatissimum exemplar." Ibid., p. 54.

Word, the “infinite nameability of all names and the infinite vocalizability of everything expressible by means of voice, so that in this way every [imposed] name is an image of the Precise Name”.<sup>257</sup> “And all”, the *idiot*a asserts (although he supposedly has no knowledge of the philosophical tradition) “have endeavoured to assert nothing else—although perhaps that which they have said could be said better and more clearly.”<sup>258</sup>

Urging the *idiot*a to return to the topic of mind, the philosopher asks what mind is (accepting that its name does derive from the notion of ‘measuring’). The layman answers that mind is the image of the Infinite Mind. Accordingly, if the Infinite Mind is the all-encompassing unity of the true nature of all things, then the mind, as image, is the all-encompassing unity of the *assimilation* of all things, which is also to say, the unity of all *concepts*.<sup>259</sup> Just as the Divine Mind’s conceiving is a *producing* of things, so is our mind’s conceiving a *conceptualizing* of things. And, with respect to the Absolute Being of the Divine Mind, its conceiving is a creating, whereas ours is an assimilating. Thus all things that are present in the Divine Mind perfectly and properly are present in our minds as an *image* or *likeness* of that proper truth. In short, “mind, in and of itself, is an image of God”.<sup>260</sup>

In Chapter 4, Cusanus, through the *idiot*a, distinguishes between the notions of *image* (*imago*) and *unfolding* (*explicatio*). Whereas the unfolding of oneness is plurality, he explains, the image of oneness is equality:

Idiota: I want to be understood in the following way (for what must be said cannot be expressed suitably; hence an expansive number of words is quite useful): Notice that an image is one thing and an unfolding is another thing. For example, equality is the image of oneness. [...] but equality is not the unfolding of oneness, rather plurality is. Therefore equality is the image, not the unfolding of the enfolding-oneness. In a similar way, I want to say that mind, of all the images of the Divine Enfolding, is the most simple image of the Divine Mind. And so, mind is the primary image of the Divine Enfolding, which enfolds, by its own power and simplicity, all images of unfolding. For just as God is the enfolding of enfoldings, so mind, which is an image of God, is an image of the Enfolding of enfoldings. Subsequent to these images are the pluralities of things than unfold the Divine Enfolding of enfolding.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>257</sup> “[...] infinita nominabilitas omnium nominum, et infinita vocabilitas omnium voce expressibilium, ut sic omne nomen sit imago praecisi nominis.” Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>258</sup> “Et nihil aliud omnes conati sunt dicere, licet forte id, quod dixerunt, melius et clarius dici posset.” Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>260</sup> “[...] mens sit per se Dei imago [...]” Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>261</sup> “Volo quidem hoc modo. Nam quod dicendum est, convenienter exprimi nequit. Hinc multiplicatio sermonum perutilis est. Attende aliam esse imaginem, aliam



The human mind is not an unfolding of the divine Mind, but an image. As an image of the all-enfolding oneness of the Divine Mind, our minds possess the power of unfolding the images of all things in creation. Because the mind possesses “the assimilative power of an enfolding oneness”, it therefore has the power to “assimilate itself to every multitude”.<sup>262</sup> In these passages, we see Cusanus very carefully defining and distinguishing the notions of exemplar, image, and unfolding, no doubt in order to preclude the kind of accusations hurled at him by Wenck, namely, that he represented a pantheistic doctrine in which God is believed to be the same as his creation. In Cusanus’ very deliberate explication of the differences between the divine Mind as enfolding and producing, and the human mind as conceptualizing and assimilative, one hears the echoes of Wenck’s mocking accusation that Cusanus cannot even tell the difference between an image and an exemplar. The *De ignota litteratura* seems thus still to be have been in the back of Cusanus’ mind when he wrote *De mente*.<sup>263</sup>

The philosopher next asks the *idiot*a whether he believes, like Aristotle, that the mind comes into being as a blank slate, free of concepts, or whether he agrees with Plato, that concepts of things were concreated with the soul but forgotten due to the “burden of corporeality” (*moles corporis*).<sup>264</sup> The *idiot*a responds that the images, or concepts, through which the mind conceives, were not concreated with the soul and then forgotten in the bodily state. Rather the soul needs the body so that its concreated power may be actualized. On the other hand, the mind does not function as a blank slate: rather the power of the mind can only function when stimulated by perceptible objects.<sup>265</sup> What we have here is therefore a model of mind as the *power of judgment*:

In this respect, then, Aristotle seems rightly to have thought that there are no concepts concreated with the soul at its beginning [...]. But since it cannot at all learn if it lacks all judgment (*iudicio*) [...] our mind has concreated with it judgment [...]. This power of judgment (*vis iudiciaria*) is by nature

---

explicationem. Nam aequalitas est unitatis imago; ex unitate enim semel oritur aequalitas. Unde unitatis imago est aequalitas; et non est aequalitas unitatis explicatio, sed pluralitas complicationis. Igitur unitatis aequalitas est imago, non explicatio.” Ibid., pp. 58–59.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>263</sup> Again, *contra* Flasch, who claimed that by *Idiot*a *de mente*, “Wenck scheint vergessen”. Cf. Flasch (1998), p. 274.

<sup>264</sup> h *Idiot*a *de mente*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.



concreated with the mind. [...] If by 'concreated concept' Plato meant this power, then he did not at all err.<sup>266</sup>

Once again, Aristotle and Plato are harmonized through *idiotia* wisdom. In the absence of sensible images, the mind is only a potency—a potential for conceptualizing. It becomes actual only when stimulated by sensible input, whereby it creates images, which are moreover created only by virtue of imperceptible forms. The mind is a junction between the enfolding Exemplar and unfolded creation. As Cusanus writes:

From the foregoing we learn that mind is that power which, when stimulated, can assimilate itself to every form and can make concepts of all things, even though it lacks all conceptual form.<sup>267</sup>

Here it must be pointed out that Moffitt Watts' interpretation of *Idiotia de mente* fails to heed Cusanus' emphasis on the essentially assimilative nature of mind. Because it supports her strongly humanist interpretation of him, she chooses instead to focus on the mind as a (largely independent) creative power:

God has created the universe not out of necessity but freely. Correspondingly, man, the image of God, is the creator of his conjectural and metaphorical universe. [...] The fact that he is the image of God and the creator and ruler of his own universe is the source of his cosmic status and dignity. The human mind, created in the image and likeness of the divine mind, is

---

<sup>266</sup> "In hoc igitur Aristoteles videtur bene opinari, animae non esse notiones ab initio concreatatas [...]. Verum quoniam non potest proficere, si omni caret iudicio [...] mens nostra habet sibi concreatatum iudicium, sine quo proficere nequiret. Haec vis iudiciaria est menti naturaliter concreatata [...]. Quam vim si Plato notionem nominavit concreatam, non penitus erravit." Ibid., p. 61. The term "vis iudiciaria" comes from Augustine, who spoke of it as an inner act of judgment necessary to distinguish between sense perceptions (*De musica* VI, 5, 23). On this, cf. e.g., Schmitt, A. "Synästhesie im Urteil aristotelischer Philosophie" in Adler, H. And Zeuch, U., eds. *Synästhesie. Interferenz—Transfer—Synthese der Sinne*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002, 108–147, p. 139: "Augustinus spricht vom Hören als von einer *naturalis vis iudiciaria* und weist dem Hören von komplexen Toneinheiten, von Harmonien und Disharmonien und dgl., das für Augustinus bereits eine synästhetische, von *sensus communis* oder *sensus interior* vollzogene Wahrnehmung ist, eine höhere Stufe in der Hierarchie der Erkenntnisweisen zu, er spricht dem *sensus interior numeri iudiciales*, einen an zahlhafter Bestimmtheit orientierten Urteilsakt zu, etwa wenn man eine Oktave von einer Quint unterscheidet [...].". A brief discussion of the Augustinian origin of Cusanus' use of the *vis iudiciaria* can also be found in Van Velthoven, T. *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität. Studien zur Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues*. Leiden: Brill, 1977, pp. 105–106.

<sup>267</sup> "Experimur ex hoc mentem esse vim illam, quae licet careat omni notionali forma, potest tamen excitata seipsam omni formae assimilare et omnium rerum notiones facere [...]." h *Idiotia de mente*, p. 61.

self-generating and self-perpetuating. Therefore it contains within itself the seeds of its own immortality.<sup>268</sup>

However, Cusanus' depiction of the mind as "an image of the Enfolding of enfoldings" is intended to underscore not the mind's creative power but its *dependence* upon its divine Exemplar; similarly he emphasizes the mind's dependence upon sensible images for its operation: as a *vis iudiciaria*, mind in itself is empty—it is, as said above, a mere potency until actualized by input from those things unfolded in creation. And its power, when so actualized, is not a *creative* power—since the mind creates no things—but an *assimilative* one—i.e., it produces only more images. Furthermore, mind is neither self-generating nor self-perpetuating, since, being a mere image, its power is entirely derivative of the Exemplar itself (Cusanus follows Eckhart on this point).

Because mind has been shown to be a power of judgment and image of the Divine Mind, it is from here an easy step to the conclusion that the mind is immortal. And so, after a number of intervening investigations, the *idiot* once again returns, in the final chapter of the dialogue, to the notion of mind as an innate power of judgment:

If someone takes note of the mind's concreated judgment, through which the mind judges about all rational considerations, and if he notes that rational considerations are from mind, then he recognizes that no reasoning attains unto the measurements of the mind. Therefore our mind remains unmeasurable by, unboundable by, and undelimitable by any reasoning, which only the uncreated Mind measures, delimits, and bounds [...]. Therefore just as it is impossible that Infinite Truth (since it is Absolute Goodness) should withdraw its communicated reflection, so it is impossible that its image (which is nothing but its communicated reflection), should ever perish.<sup>269</sup>

And this "concreated power of judgment" is nothing other than "innate religion (*connata religio*), which has brought these countless people to

<sup>268</sup> Moffitt Watts (1982), p. 230.

<sup>269</sup> "Qui attendit ad iudicium mentis sibi concreatam, per quod de omnibus rationibus iudicat, ac quod rationes ex mente sunt, videt nullam rationem ad mentis mensuram attingere. Manet igitur mens nostra omni ratione immensurabilis, infinibilis et interminabilis, quam sola mens increata mensurat, terminat atque finit [...]. Sicut igitur impossibile est, quod infinita veritas communicatam relucetiam subtrahat, cum sit absoluta bonitas, ita est impossibile, quod eius imago, quae non est nisi communicata relucetia eius, umquam deficiat [...]." Ibid., p. 114.

Rome this year", etc.<sup>270</sup> The association is thus clear: mind, which is the innate power to judge, or to form concepts, is nothing other than innate religion, or faith. Because faith is the structure of the mind, all men (although, most readily, *idiotae*) have access to this truth in the form of direct intuition. However to those less 'unlearned', it may also be demonstrated through a process of reasoning which begins with sensible images, proceeding to trace them back to their origin in the intellect, and ultimately, in God.

Faith is thus completely subsumed within science in *De mente*. This model can moreover be assumed to apply to *De sapientia*, where it however did not emerge explicitly because the subject of that dialogue was Wisdom *qua* Wisdom, namely, God; whereas in this dialogue the subject is the *faculty* of Wisdom, namely, mind. It emerged here precisely because faith *is* mind, and for this reason faith is equally the subject of the entire dialogue, which, in this respect, could have been entitled *De fide*. We furthermore saw that, although faith was entirely left out of the discussion in *De sapientia*, the arguments in that text nevertheless had implications which seemed to undermine its authority. There, we saw that Cusanus stressed the necessity of personal experience and disparaged knowledge acquired through 'hearing', normally associated with faith, as second-hand and derivative. The pursuit of Wisdom, he claimed, entailed not the study of authoritative texts, but rather personal reflection on the nature of Wisdom as the unknowable principle of all human understanding. In *De mente*, it becomes clearer that Wisdom is so obtainable precisely because the mind itself is an *image* of that Wisdom. However, the tenuous status of faith in *De sapientia* is rendered even more precarious by the account in *De mente*. For although, in one sense, it is made more certain than ever—insofar as it is embedded in the very structure of mind—this 'epistemological' conception of faith seems hardly any kind of faith at all, in a Christian sense, and, most problematically from a theological perspective, seems to leave no place for the authority of Scripture. At no point in these texts does Cusanus appeal to Scripture as a *necessary* source for knowledge of God or mind: while it may be usefully consulted, it seems not to contain any wisdom which the human mind could not obtain through its own devices. And Cusanus' valorization of *direct intellectual vision* over hearing seems to undermine not only the authority of Scripture, but that of

---

<sup>270</sup> "Connata religio, quae hunc innumerabilem populum in hoc anno Romam [...] adduxit [...]." Ibid., p. 114.

Ecclesiastical and theological authority in general. Wenck was particularly sensitive to this latter tendency in Cusan thought, while what troubled others, as we shall see shortly, was the other side of Cusanus' epistemological interpretation of faith, namely, its extreme *intellectualization*.

CHAPTER 1 CONCLUSION: THE CUSANUS-WENCK DEBATE,  
*APOLOGIA*, AND *IDIOTA* TREATISES

While the *Apologia* criticized scholastic theology as practiced at the universities, the *Idiota* treatises present a new model for the practice of theological science, and are as such essentially pedagogical in nature and in aim. *De sapientia* concerned knowledge of God, and *De mente* treated knowledge of the mind. Together, they comprise a programme, which Cusanus intended for use as a teaching aid. They form however not a *curriculum* (for Cusanus rejects the rote-learning of written authorities), but a model, in the sense of providing a living example of a process that is fundamentally experiential in nature—rather like a 'how-to' guide to *idiotia* science. The three figures in these treatises can likewise be viewed as stages of development: from the very stupid orator, to the more enlightened philosopher, to the ideal figure of the *idiotia*—wisest because the most learned in his ignorance. As such, the 'idiotia' state is the goal: it is not a starting point but rather something one learns; and the purpose of these treatises is thus to teach one how to become an *idiotia*. These works can in this way be regarded as Cusanus' positive response to Wenck, and as a constructive companion piece to the essentially critical and defensive *Apologia*.

There is of course something polemical about the figure of the *idiotia* in these treatises, and the suggestion that a 'spoonmaker' could educate university-trained scholars in 'true theology' is surely a provocative gesture on Cusanus' part. That in *De sapientia* this unschooled layman gives the arrogant orator, whose training has taught him only how to dispute (and whose description so closely matches that of Wenck in the *Apologia*), a lesson on unity, is certainly also intended as a jab at scholastic strife and the divisiveness of the *Wegestreit* at the universities. However, at the same time, the improbably high degree of philosophical sophistication of the *idiotia* (who clearly possesses all the knowledge of the ancient philosophical literature and theological authorities, although he always denies knowing anything of them) points to the artificiality of the 'idiotia' device, and reminds one that this is intended as a metaphor for the proper conduct of

theological science, rather than as an advocacy of irrationalism, intellectual naiveté, a 'democratization' of knowledge, or the rejection of scholarly learning as such. For all his celebration of 'idiotia' wisdom, Cusanus did not spend his time conversing about philosophy with tradesmen in the street, but with highly educated clerics; and despite his bourgeois origins, had a decidedly aristocratic attitude towards knowledge. Indeed the noble, stoic, and Socratic figure of the *idiotia* (which furthermore matches Cusanus' self-portrayal in the *Apologia*) is certainly no everyman, but a member of the philosophical elite, and a true aristocrat of the mind.

With respect to the issues of religious reform and defence of the Faith, we saw that Wenck, who was an avid conciliarist and advocate of reform, was at the same time very theologically conservative, as an adherent of the *via antiqua* who believed that only a theology thoroughly integrated with Aristotelian philosophy could defend the Faith. Cusanus, who was also deeply committed to reform, nevertheless thought that this required the rejection of the traditional mode of scholastic theology, as represented by Wenck and the *Aristotelica secta*, in favour of a more personal and experiential (although no less abstruse or intellectual) approach to theology. However, while Cusanus may appear from this perspective to be more progressive, nevertheless, when it came to the Church, he expressed a deep institutional conservatism, and his own reform measures as Cardinal were based on an authoritative and sometimes heavy-handed approach. In this respect it is Wenck, as a supporter of conciliarist reform and the limitation of papal power, who appears more progressive. In sum, the fact that the Cusanus-Wenck debate cannot be resolved into simple lines of opposition reflects how complexly interwoven were issues regarding faith and reason, the practice of philosophy and theology, and matters of church reform during this period. Depending on which aspects one considers, either adversary in this debate may appear as conservative and reactionary or progressive and forward-thinking.

In the end, Wenck's propensity for dispute and incrimination rather than genuine philosophical argument probably worked against him, and Cusanus deserves credit for taking a positive approach in trying to introduce an alternative to the disputes of the schools. However Cusanus' proposed solution, in the form of a more experiential and mystically-oriented approach to theological science, created difficulties of its own. For, in seeking to unify philosophy with theology, and thereby to resolve the tension between faith as revealed Truth and philosophical truth as the product of reason and logic, Cusanus pushed the traditional boundaries of both. Wenck recognized this tension in Cusanus' account, which, to

him, appeared as the subversion of reason. To another reader, however, coming from a very different theological perspective, it would appear as precisely the opposite. It is only because of the inherent ambiguity of the relation between faith and reason in Cusan thought that Vincent of Aggsbach was later able to accuse Cusanus of undermining the Faith through an excessively rational and scholastic approach to theology.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE TEGERNSEE DEBATE<sup>1</sup>

In December 1454, the Carthusian Vincent of Aggsbach (c. 1379–c. 1465) attacked Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance in a section of a letter which later came to be known as the "Impugnatorium doctae ignorantiae".<sup>2</sup> As is immediately apparent from the construction of this letter, however, Vincent's criticism was not limited to the latter's doctrine, and in fact the ensuing disagreement between Vincent and Cusanus was part of a much broader debate regarding the proper nature and practice of mystical theology. For Cusanus is just one member of a "trinity" created here by Vincent, which he sarcastically dubs "Gerchumar"—being comprised of John Gerson, Nicolaus C(h)usa, and Marquard Sprenger—whom he so combines because he believes all represent the same erroneous view of mystical theology. At the same time, Cusanus is clearly the most reviled of this unholy trinity: whereas Gerson and Marquard at least possessed the redeeming quality of being conciliarists, Cusanus—as a former conciliarist who had switched to papal support—was in Vincent's eyes an opportunist, a hypocrite, and a traitor to the Church. Thus, much like Wenck, Aggsbach, as a trenchant and embittered defender of the fading conciliarist cause, was an opponent of Cusanus long before this exchange began.

---

<sup>1</sup> The primary source for documents relating to the Tegernsee debate has been the edition of Vansteenbergh, E. *Autour de la Docte Ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XV<sup>e</sup> Siècle (BGPM XIV)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1915. However, a number of relevant documents are edited only in Pez, B. and Hueber, P., eds. *Codex Diplomatico-Historico-Epistolaris : Quo Diplomata, Chartae, Epistolae, Fragmenta Opusculorum, Epitaphia, et alia id genus vetera monumenta . . . continentur, totiusque pene Europae historia illustratur*. Augustae Vind. et Graecii: Veith, 1729. The correspondence between Cusanus and the Tegernsee brothers has also been edited in the *Acta Cusana*. At the time of publication of this dissertation a new, critical edition of the works of Bernard of Waging and some of Vincent of Aggsbach's writings is being prepared under the auspices of the Martin Grabbmann Institute (München). As this is some years away from completion, our references to the Tegernsee-related documents rely primarily on Vansteenbergh, Pez, and the *Acta Cusana*. English translations here of the Cusanus-Tegernsee correspondence edited in Vansteenbergh (1915) are based on a yet-unpublished translation of Thomas Izbicki, used with his permission, with my occasional changes.

<sup>2</sup> The title is not included in Vincent's actual letter, but derives from Bernard of Waging's subsequent *Defensorium laudatorii doctae ignorantiae* (1459), in which he defends his earlier praise of learned ignorance: « Ecce finit *Defensorium laudatorii doctae ignorantie contra Impugnatorium eiusdem* [. . .]. » Vansteenbergh, ed. (1915), p. 188.

Also like in the Wenck case, the debate between Vincent and Cusanus was an indirect encounter, carried out through letters addressed to common acquaintances of both who then acted as intermediaries, passing the letters and their subsequent responses back and forth between the adversaries, as well as transmitting copies to other acquaintances. Unlike in the Cusanus-Wenck debate, in this case, others became actively involved in the argument, offering their own defenses of either Vincent's or Cusanus' respective positions, in some cases taking sides, and in some cases attempting to mediate between them.

While this debate is generally identified with the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee (and is sometimes referred to as the "Tegernseer Mystikerstreit"),<sup>3</sup> in fact the texts which formed the focal point of the debate were by Cusanus, Tegernsee prior Bernard of Waging, München theologian Marquard Sprenger,<sup>4</sup> and Vincent, who belonged to the Carthusian monastery at Aggsbach, with Melk prior John Schlitpacher, serving as intermediary, transmitting texts and correspondence between the various parties.<sup>5</sup> Thus the "Tegernsee" debate encompassed a somewhat broader sphere. The debate was furthermore complicated by the fact that Aggsbach's interpretation of Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance was based not on *De docta ignorantia*—which he had not read—but on an encomium of the treatise written by Bernard.<sup>6</sup>

Although our primary focus in this study is Cusanus, nevertheless, neither the criticism nor praise his doctrine of learned ignorance received in the course of this debate can be properly appreciated without grasping something of the context out of which it evolved. To make clearer how and why this debate emerged in the first place, we must first familiarize ourselves with the respective players, the intellectual and political milieu

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the article on Nikolaus Kempf in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon*. Bd. 4. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983, p. 1122.

<sup>4</sup> On Sprenger and his writings, see Roßmann, H. "Der Magister Marquard Sprenger in München und seine Kontroversschriften zum Konzil von Basel und zur mystischen Theologie" in Roßmann, H. And Ratzinger, J., eds. *Mysterium der Gnade. Festschrift für Johann Auer*. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1975, 353–411.

<sup>5</sup> There were also some later contributions, or at any rate, responses to this debate, such as the *De mystica theologia* (c. 1458–65) of Nikolaus Kempf of Gailing, who, however, was not involved in the exchange of letters comprising the debate proper. On Kempf, see below, section "The University of Vienna and reform in Austria", n. 27.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Bernard is also a direct target in the *Impugnatorium*, although not included in the trio "Gerchumar", probably since Vincent considered Bernard's encomium to be a mere compilation of quotations from *De docta ignorantia*, containing no original material (an accusation against which Bernard protests in his subsequent *Defensorium laudatorii docte ignorantie*).



in which they worked, and the origins of Cusanus' relationship with them. Since virtually all of those involved were associated at one time with the University of Vienna and the Council of Basel, we will briefly review their Vienna origins before looking more closely at the issue of Vincent's conciliarist grudge against Cusanus. Against this background, we will then describe the reception of Cusanus' works in the Tegernsee circle, and the subsequent emergence of the debate.<sup>7</sup>

## BACKGROUND OF THE DEBATE

### *The University of Vienna and Reform in Austria*

At the time of the Basel council, Austria was almost entirely on the side of conciliarism, including the University of Vienna, which was deeply concerned with reform.<sup>8</sup> University rector Nikolaus Dinkelsbühl (1360–1433) began a program to reform the Benedictine monasteries, beginning with reform of the monastery at Melk in 1418, which resulted in an especially close relationship between the order and the council of Basel. The Carthusian order also supported conciliarism, declaring its official support in April 1440.<sup>9</sup> Close correspondence between the church-political views of the cloisters and the university at this time also resulted from the fact that many of the monks in Austria had taken degrees at Vienna.<sup>10</sup> All of

---

<sup>7</sup> Cusanus' debate with Vincent of Aggsbach has been treated by a number of commentators, beginning with Vansteenberghe, who edited the essential texts (Vansteenberghe [1915]), and more recently, e.g., by Baum (Baum [1983]), Meier-Oeser (Meier-Oeser, S. *Die Präsenz des Vergessenen. Zur Rezeption der Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus vom 15. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1989), and Trottmann (who focused on Vincent's attack on Gerson; Trottmann, C. "Sic in vi affectiva: Note sur *De theologia mystica* III, 27, sa réception par Vincent d'Aggsbach, son dépassement par Gerson et quelques auteurs ultérieurs" in *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 45 (SIEPM). Turnhout: Brepols, 2003. 167–188); however the subject has not yet been examined specifically from the perspective of the 15th century debates on faith and reason, nor has it been considered how Cusanus' written contributions to this debate fit into the overall development of his own position on faith and reason.

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Keck, in a 1443 letter to Johannes Svbbachs, attested to the piety and Catholic faith of Vienna alumni, writing: « Non enim dubitare possum idipsum de quolibet sacrarum literarum professore, nec ita me sencientem ab alme universitatis studii Wiennensis fide me aberrare existimo, cum eam maxime catholicam hactenus constet extitisse. » This text is edited in Redlich, V. *Tegernsee und die deutsche Geistesgeschichte im 15. Jahrhundert*. München: Kommission für Bayerische Landesgeschichte, 1931, p. 195 (Anhang nr. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Stieber (1978), p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> On the intellectual milieu of the reform-minded University of Vienna in the late-15th century, see chapter II of Martin, D. *Fifteenth-Century Carthusian Reform. The World of Nicholas Kempf*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

the men instrumental in the reform of the Benedictine orders in Melk and elsewhere were closely connected with Vienna University, including Abbot Nikolaus Gehringer, John Schlitpacher, Johannes Keck, Conrad von Geisenfeld, and Bernard of Waging.<sup>11</sup> The university began to distance itself from conciliarism around 1442, although it did not openly support Eugene.<sup>12</sup> The close relationship between the university and the cloisters was also reflected in the latter's library collections. The libraries at the monastery of Melk possessed an large number of manuscripts containing works of Vienna professors like Dinkelsbühl and Ebendorffer.<sup>13</sup> Tegernsee had a very rich library collection as well, reflecting the dominant influence of Vienna and the monastery's strong and well-developed intellectual culture.<sup>14</sup> In fact, after Johannes Keck, there was no prior at Tegernsee who was not a master or at least a bachelor of Vienna University.<sup>15</sup>

Cusanus had a number of connections with Vienna alumni, including the theologian Johannes Keck (1400–1450), who had studied there for seven years and taught for two years in the Arts faculty.<sup>16</sup> An orator and spokesman at the Basel Council,<sup>17</sup> Keck entered the monastery at Tegernsee in 1442, and thus we can say that it was through Keck that Cusanus first came into contact with Tegernsee.<sup>18</sup> In 1450, Keck sent a letter to the Cardinal in which he praised the latter's knowledge of languages and literature. This letter mentions *De docta ignorantia*, which Keck said he had not yet read, but claims had already achieved considerable renown. Keck had a keen interest in mystical theology which leaned towards the affective side. He asks Cusanus' advice on which authors to read, as the latter

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), pp. 24–25.

<sup>14</sup> "Inhaltlich war diese Bibliothek, vor allem in ihren theologischen Beständen, eine völlige Spiegelung des Wiener Literaturlebens und seines ganzen scholastischen Betriebes. Es gibt kaum einen irgendwie bedeutenderen philosophischen, theologischen oder juristischen Schriftsteller der Wiener Hochschule, den man nicht unter den Tegernseer Handschriften finden könnte." Redlich (1931), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Keck remained on the side of conciliarism until 1447–48, when he penned the tract *Ecclesiasticus unitor*, arguing for an end to the schism. This led to a debate with still-loyal conciliarists Sprenger, Schlitpacher, and Aggsbach, as described below, p. 174; cf. also Roßmann, H. "Der Tegernseer Benediktiner Johannes Keck über die mystische Theologie" in *MFCG* 13. Mainz: Matthias Grünwald Verlag, 1978, 330–352, p. 343.

<sup>18</sup> Keck probably brought a manuscript of Pseudo-Dionysius with him to Tegernsee. Cf. Baum (1983), p. 62.

had, in Keck's estimation, accomplished through his work a synthesis of the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew traditions.<sup>19</sup>

A fellow student of Keck at Vienna was John Schlitpacher (1403–1482), an Austrian reformer who studied philosophy and theology at Vienna under masters Nicholas Dinkelsbühl, John Nider, and Thomas Ebendorfer. He entered the Benedictine monastery at Melk in 1434, becoming a prior in 1436.<sup>20</sup> Together with fellow Melk prior Conrad of Geisenfeld (1400–1460), who had earned his Master of Arts at Vienna in 1431 and was a prior at Melk by 1435,<sup>21</sup> Schlitpacher spent a number of years introducing the “Melk Observance” to other monasteries in Augsburg and Ettal.<sup>22</sup> Schlitpacher would also later be one of the three official “visitors” of the reform commission organized by Cusanus during his 1451–52 legation, which visited fifty-two monasteries throughout Germany and the low countries.<sup>23</sup> On matters of reform he was, however, sometimes critical of Cusanus, whose reform measures he found “excessively severe and utterly intolerable” (*nimis aspera et prorsus intolerabilia*).<sup>24</sup>

In 1447, Schlitpacher returned to Melk and Geisenfeld went to Tegernsee.<sup>25</sup> The two friends maintained correspondence over the years which is now an important source of information about Cusanus. Both Schlitpacher and Geisenfeld were also in close contact with the Carthusian, Vincent of Aggsbach. Schlitpacher was a prolific letter writer, and has been described as the “newspaper” of the monastery at Melk, as he had the habit

---

<sup>19</sup> « Hanc ecce sapientissimam stulticiam portendere videntur vocabula tua, pater reverendissime, quorum unum, scilicet <Nicholas>, <languentis ecclesie stultus> interpretatur, alterum vero, scilicet <Cusa>, <tenebrosus iste> secundum beatum Ieronimum interpretatur, peritissimam stulticiam tuam, quam cum sponsa amore languens genitricem esse crediderim michi nondum vise ‘Docte ignorantie’ tue, quam edidisse longe lateque predicaris. [...] Hec est de predictis mea coniectura, pater reverendissime, super qua velim edoceri a te peritissimo viro et maxime sciente omnia, nedum que apud Latinos sunt, sed et que apud Grecos et Hebreos scibilia habentur. [...] Quis etenim Latinorum doctorum omnia de deo dicibilia et quantumlibet contraria sic recte valuit, ut tu, concordare? » This letter was written sometime prior to June 29, 1450 (the date of Keck's death from the plague), in Rome. *Acta Cusana*, nr. 405, pp. 632–33. For more on Keck's life and writings on mystical theology, see Roßmann, H. “Der Tegernseer Benediktiner Johannes Keck über die mystische Theologie” in *MFCG* 13. Mainz: Matthias Grünwald Verlag, 1978, 330–352.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), pp. 26–27.

<sup>22</sup> The monastery at Melk had been one of the early successes of 15th-century monastic reform, whose example, which became known as the “Melk observance”, was then taken to other monasteries, although apparently Schlitpacher and Geisenfeld had little success at Augsburg and Ettal. Cf. Redlich (1931), pp. 24–25.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 63.

of copying all correspondence that he received and sending it on to his other acquaintances, often transmitting the latter's replies to these letters back to their original sender, thus keeping his friends abreast of current debates and news.<sup>26</sup> He tended to remain neutral himself, maintaining the role of intermediary, although late in the Tegernsee debate he would write to Sprenger in defense of Aggsbach, after Aggsbach declined further participation. Thus, just as Gelnhausen had been for Wenck and Cusanus, Schlitpacher was both instigator and moderator of the debate between Cusanus and Aggsbach (which might never have occurred, had he not forwarded Bernard's *Laudatorium* to Vincent, and Vincent's *Impugnatorium* to Cusanus). More specifically, in the debate over mystical theology under discussion here, Schlitpacher functioned as middleman between Cusanus, Waging, and Munich theologian Marquard Sprenger on the one side, and Vincent of Aggsbach on the other.<sup>27</sup> Schlitpacher did write more than just letters, however, and his own writings include various (still unedited) glosses and commentaries on topics and works related to mystical theology which demonstrate his keen interest in the subject.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Resulting in a large collection of church-political and university-historical documents at Tegernsee. As Redlich wrote: "Alles, was von der Einwirkung Wiens auf Süddeutschland gesagt wurde, gilt nun in gesteigertem Maße für Tegernsee. [...] Finden sich doch in Tegernsee allein mehr Quellen und Beiträge zur Wiener Universitätsgeschichte als in den Benediktiner-Abteien Oberbayerns zusammen." Redlich (1931), p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Schlitpacher also corresponded with Carthusian Nikolaus Kempf on matters related to mystical theology, although the latter, as said, did not contribute directly to the debate through letters. As such, he will not be brought under specific consideration here, although his works on mystical theology are interesting in their own right. Born in Strasbourg, Nikolaus Kempf (c. 1410–16–1497) also studied at Vienna, where he taught as a master in the Arts faculty from 1437–39. He entered the charterhouse at Gaming in 1440, was prior in Geirach (Slovenia) between 1447–51, then again at Gaming from 1451–58, at Pleterje from 1462–67, and finally back in Geirach between 1467–90. He wrote a number of works relating to mystical theology, the most significant of which is his *De mystica theologia* (c. 1458–65. Universitätsbibliothek Graz, cod. 262, 43r–128v; Tegernsee also possessed a copy of the text), a systematic treatment which seeks to show the differences between scholastic and mystical theology, and takes up some of the questions at issue in the so-called "Tegernseer Mystikerstreit" between Cusanus, Waging, and Aggsbach. Like Vincent, Kempf defended a strictly affective approach to mystical theology. Kempf also wrote a treatise in 1447 called *Dialogus de recto studiorum fine ac ordine et fugiendis vite secularis vanitatibus* (Wien, cod. 4259, 39r–77r; reportedly there was also a copy of this text at Tegernsee until the 18th century), which was "ein an Akademiker gerichteter Aufruf zum Studieren der 'echten', affektiven und mystischen Theologie im Kloster, besonders im Kartäuserorden" (Ruh, K. et al., ed. *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon*. Bd. 4. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983, pp. 1118; 1121–22).

<sup>28</sup> Vansteenbergh lists the following titles, all of which are conserved in the library at Melk: *Glossa interlinearis Epist. B. Dionysii ad Gaium*, *Glossa super Mysticam Theologiam S. Dionysii ex commentis Dni Linconiensis et Vercellensis collecta* (1455), *Commentarium in*

Schlitpacher was also a friend of Bernard of Waging (c. 1400–1472), who had similarly taken an Arts degree at Vienna before entering the monastery at Tegernsee, where he became a prior in 1447. Bernard was actively engaged in monastic reform and made frequent visits to neighbouring monasteries as part of this work.<sup>29</sup> He participated in some of Cusanus' reform efforts, such as visiting the Abbey of Sonnenburg in an attempt to negotiate reform with the notoriously problematic Abbess Verena, where he, however, met with no more success than had Cusanus.<sup>30</sup> And, like Schlitpacher, Bernard was sometimes critical of Cusanus' reform measures, which he also felt were overbearing. He even questioned Nicholas' authority on matters of monastic reform, suggesting that the Cardinal had no business preaching on the monastic life when he had never lived it himself:

The zeal of the reverend lord must be moderated, so that, in the words of St. Benedict, the vessel is not broken while one aims to remove the rust from it too thoroughly. During visitations one must act more humbly and with greater discretion, otherwise nothing will be achieved. [...] And how should the Bishop, who has never himself experienced a regular life, be able to introduce others to it?<sup>31</sup>

Significantly, Bernard was expressly critical of what he felt to be Cusanus' emphasis on *rules* rather than *love*. It was only in the presence of sincere love, he wrote, that true observance would occur.<sup>32</sup> Waging's and Schlitpacher's concerns were not without ground: When Cusanus had taken up his bishopric in Brixen, he set about implementing strict clerical reforms

---

*libellum S. Dionysii de Mystica Theologia* (1456), *Tractatus de ascensionibus cordis*, and *Tractatus de contemplatione* (1463). Cf. Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), p. 91. For a full description of Bernard's reform activities, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 101–110.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard visited the convent on September 27, 1453. His subsequent letters to Cusanus on the matter express a sense of hopelessness about restoring order there. In his letter to Cusanus of Feb. 12, 1454, Bernard wrote "[...] about the reform of the monastery of Sonnenburg [...] there is no good will in the abbess [i.e., Verena von Stuben] or the sisters except in words and those coerced. With them being thus, we could work in vain to establish the regular life there. Rather they are inwardly ignorant of the religious life and the rule" (cf. Vansteenbergh [1915], Documents, Letter 10, p. 124). And in another letter from April 1454, he again wrote in frustration: "It is difficult and scarcely possible for the observance to be established firmly with women in that place of religion. [...] They complain everywhere of the shortage of victuals, but they do not treat, or very little, of the salvation or damnation of souls" (cf. *ibid.*, Letter 18, p. 186). For more on Bernard's reform work with Cusanus, cf. Redlich (1931), p. 102; and Vansteenbergh (1920), pp. 146 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Redlich (1931), p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> « Ubi enim caritatis regula non custoditur, nulla regularis observancia invenitur. » Clm. 18565, f. 258v.

which quickly made him very unpopular with both clergy and the local Princes, as he sought to restore to the Church wealth and power that had been increasingly shifting to secular rulers. Where he met with resistance, his reaction was often severe and uncompromising, including threats, excommunication, and even military action.<sup>33</sup> His power struggle with Duke Sigismund eventually became so acrimonious that Cusanus had to abandon his bishopric and flee the region, spelling an end to his reform efforts in the Tyrol.

While known today primarily as the man who wrote an encomium of Cusanus' *De docta ignorantia*, Bernard also penned a number of other works.<sup>34</sup> Most notably, he authored a tractate in 1459 entitled *De cognoscendo Deum*, in which he once again takes up the issues central to the debate over mystical theology, discussing how one may best and most quickly come to know God, and the respective roles played by love and reason. In April 1461, Bernard was summoned to Eichstatt by the bishop Johannes of Eych to reform its Benedictine monastery. While there, he wrote a treatise entitled *Speculum pastorum*, in which he considers whether a life of detachment is better than a life of worldly engagement in the form of good works.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, his decision was for the former, even though his own life was a demonstration of the latter.<sup>36</sup>

Waging had a close and amicable relationship with Tegernsee Abbot Caspar Aindorffer, who trusted him with many official functions,<sup>37</sup> and although Bernard never became abbot himself, he nevertheless exercised a great influence upon the intellectual development of the monastery.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Cusa eventually came to blows with Verena von Stuben over the Sonnenburg dispute, his army killing over 50 of her armed men, on Apr. 5, 1458. Cf. Watanabe (2001), p. 161, or Hallauer (1969).

<sup>34</sup> There are over 40 manuscripts containing works by Waging in the Stadtbibliothek München, according to Vansteenberghé, including titles such as the (edited) *De spiritualibus sentimentis et de perfectione spirituali*, *Remediarium pusillanimum et scrupulosorum*, *Epistola de obitu Caspari Aindorffer*, and the (as yet unedited) works *Utrum in hac vita Deus in contemplatione possit videri et mente attingi*, *De exercitio interiori cum Deo*, *De gustu suavitatis et cognitionis divinae*, *Speculum pastorum*, and *Defensio speculi*. In particular Vansteenberghé identifies München Stadtbibliothek Cod. Lat. 18 600 as containing the largest concentration of Bernard's works. Cf. Vansteenberghé (1915), p. 3. Bernard's entire correspondence with Cusanus and Aindorffer regarding the present debate is edited in *ibid.*, as well as in the *Acta Cusana*.

<sup>35</sup> Stadtbibliothek München Ms. Clm. 18 548 b ff. 111–122.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), pp. 104–108.

<sup>37</sup> According to Vansteenberghé, Abbot Aindorffer did nothing without first consulting Bernard. Cf. Vansteenberghé (1915), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Redlich (1931), p. 94.

He was a close confidant of Cusanus from 1452 onwards. More than just a passive partner who received wisdom from Cusanus, he was rather an active conversation partner.

Tegernsee Abbot Caspar Aindorffer maintained a lively correspondence with Cusanus going back as far as 1451, and the latter was always happy to oblige the Abbot's requests for texts or information. The two had a very warm relationship; unlike Bernard, however, the Abbot shows himself in his letters to be an appreciative but largely passive recipient of the Cardinal's wisdom. He asks his advice on matters of mystical theology, communicating to him questions posed by the brothers, urges Cusanus to send copies of his own works, and expresses his deep gratitude and admiration for his wisdom. However, he never really enters into the debate himself, nor does he take a side on any of its related issues.

Marquard Sprenger became a Master of Arts at Vienna in 1423. He went on to study theology, but there is no record of when he finished or with what specific degree; however, in 1436 he returned to München as a priest. Marquard was a very active supporter of conciliarism at Basel and a close associate of the theologian and bishop of Freising and avid conciliarist Johannes Grünwalder.<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above, in 1447/48 Johannes Keck, who had recently switched from conciliarism to papal support, wrote the treatise *Ecclesiasticus unitor*, in which he argued the papal cause.<sup>40</sup> Both Schlitpacher and Sprenger subsequently wrote separate works against this treatise, inciting a response from Keck and leading to a back-and-forth argument amongst the three which lasted until 1448.<sup>41</sup> Because of his continued support of conciliarism, Vincent of Aggsbach praised Sprenger even when criticizing the views on mystical theology expressed in the latter's 1453 treatise *Elucidatorium mysticae theologiae*.<sup>42</sup> Marquard later responded to Vincent's attack on this work with an "Apologia" of his treatise in 1459.<sup>43</sup> Sprenger corresponded with Waging, Geisenfeld, and Schlitpacher in the course of this debate.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Article: "Marquard Sprenger" in Wachinger, B. et al. eds. *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon*. Berlin: De Gruyter, Bd. 9, pp. 157–58.

<sup>40</sup> In 1443 Keck had written the pro-conciliar work "Tractatus de sacro Basiliensi concilio", which he dedicated to Grünwalder. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>41</sup> For a complete list of the texts comprising Sprenger's contribution to this debate, see Wachinger, pp. 159–160.

<sup>42</sup> München Clm. 18600, 359r–407v.

<sup>43</sup> The *Apologia elucidatorii mysticae theologiae*. Cf. München Clm. 18759, 54r–84v. To this Marquard appended a "Complementum Elucidatorii", as a supplementary chapter to the original work; cf. München Clm. 18759, 85r–118v.



In comparison with the others, we have very little biographical information about Vincent of Aggsbach. He was a prior at the Charterhouse of Aggsbach by at least 1435 and remained so until 1448.<sup>44</sup> Unlike those he debated, he appears to have been a man of little formal education, and is the only one without ties to the University of Vienna. Most of what is known about him regards his character, and the image evoked by his aggressive criticism of Cusanus of a stubborn, abrasive, and bitter old man is borne out by other sources. Indeed his unyielding and undiplomatic nature was a source of tension within his own order, resulting in his censure and eventual deposition as prior of Aggsbach.<sup>45</sup> The issues about which he was so passionate and which caused him these problems were conciliarism and mystical theology. 18th-century Gaming librarian Leopold Wydemann wrote that Vincent's early censures for verbal attacks were related to conciliarism.<sup>46</sup> However his deposition seems to have been directly related to his persistent involvement in the debate over mystical theology. Thomas Papler, prior of Aggsbach from 1448–58, wrote a letter to Schlitpacher expressing concern about the numerous letters written by Vincent to Schlitpacher regarding the question of mystical theology. Vincent's preoccupation with this debate, according to Papler, is of little use and is unlikely to bear fruit, and he questions the wisdom of allowing Vincent to pursue the matter further.<sup>47</sup> Papler furthermore indicates that he was asked by a certain religious prelate<sup>48</sup> to take up this matter with Vincent, whose preoccupations in his opinion were verging on the prideful.

Vincent had a strictly affective approach to mystical theology and believed that man must completely abandon the senses and the intellect in order to become one with God. In this belief, he aligned himself

---

<sup>44</sup> On the history of the Carthusian chapter at Aggsbach, as well as its personages, see Thir, K. "Der heilige Bruno und die Kartäuser" in Hogg, J., et al., eds. *Die Kartause Aggsbach (Analecta Cartusiana 169)*. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 2000, 3–8; and also Roßmann, H. "Die Geschichte der Kartause Aggsbach" in *ibid.*, 57–285.

<sup>45</sup> Censured by the General Chapter in 1420 and 1425 for "linguae vitium" and deposed in 1448 for "contumacy". Thomas Papler replaced Vincent as prior of Aggsbach when he was deposed. Cf. Martin, D. *Fifteenth Century Carthusian Reform. The World of Nicholas Kempf*. Leiden: Brill, 1992, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 107, n. 106.

<sup>47</sup> «Frater Vincentius pluries mittit vobis quaestiones, super quibus petit responsum, et in quibus satis percipitis occupationem suam minus utilem. Et ego quaero a vobis, an caute permittam eum in talibus rebus occupari, ubi verisimiliter modicus vel nullus fructus sequitur.» Cf. Pez (1729), p. 357; for the full letter with English translation, cf. below, Appendix 7.

<sup>48</sup> According to Martin, most certainly Nicholas Kempf. Cf. Martin (1992), p. 175, n. 68.



with the mystical theology of thirteenth-century Carthusian mystic, Hugh of Balma, which he believed represented the correct interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>49</sup> Even the relatively affectively-oriented *Mystical Theology* of Jean Gerson was too rational for him. As Baum expressed it: "With Vincent, it was more about faith and, with Cusanus, it was more about reason".<sup>50</sup> Aggsbach knew little of Cusanus' actual writings, and had only read *Idiota de sapientia* and *De visione Dei* in the original. He knew of *De docta ignorantia* only from Bernard of Waging's *Laudatorium*, as we said, which did not prevent him from commenting extensively on it, as he supposed Bernard's work to be essentially a compilation of extracts from the original.

In summary, we see that all of those involved in the Tegernsee debate with the exception of Vincent had earned at least an Arts degree at Vienna. The high level of education of the monks especially at the monasteries of Tegernsee and Melk contributed to the flourishing of their intellectual culture in the late fifteenth century, and their curiosity and avid acquisition of new texts naturally fomented discussion and debate. That such a debate developed on the topic of mystical theology is unsurprising, since in the fifteenth century it was intimately connected with issues of religious reform. Everyone involved in the debate was at one time a conciliarist. When one reads accounts of the Basel Council, with all its high-powered legal wrangling and complex political negotiations, it is easy to get the impression that it was just a struggle for worldly power—an affair of popes, princes, and lawyers<sup>51</sup>—and to forget that, at least in principle, conciliarism was a reform movement dedicated to solving the problems of curial and monastic corruption and to the reform and regulation of devotional practices amongst believers. The spread of lay devotional movements in the fifteenth century was one response to this corruption, monastic debates on mystical theology was another.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Vincent copied Gerson's writings and considered that Gerson had misunderstood Dionysius. Cf. Baum (1983), p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> An impression one receives very strongly, for example, when reading Stieber's history of the Basel Council. Cf. Stieber (1978).

<sup>52</sup> On popular anti-clericalism in the late Middle Ages, see, for example, Elm, K. "Anticlericalismus im deutschen Mittelalter" in *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Dykema, P. and Obermann, H., eds. Leiden: Brill, 1993, 3–18. On the spread of lay religious movements, see, for example, Burger, C. "Theologie und Laienfrömmigkeit. Transformationsversuche im Spätmittelalter" in *Lebenslehren und Weltentwürfe im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989, 400–420;

Mystical theology's focus on personal development, inward reflection, and worldly detachment appealed strongly to lay devotees disillusioned with the traditional ecclesiastical hierarchy, who saw in it the possibility to take their spiritual care into their own hands. To those of an educated, academic background, such as the monks at Tegernsee and Melk, mystical theology was a solution to the excesses of scholastic theology as practiced in the universities, which had been sharply criticized by Gerson in the fourteenth century. Gerson had wanted to see academic theology return to a more modest, contemplative, monastic type of devotion, and thought that mystical theology was the solution to the vain curiosity and pride fostered by the excessive study of logic and pursuit of empty distinctions.

Gerson criticized scholasticism in his treatise *Contra curiositatem studentium*,<sup>53</sup> and in his April 1, 1400 letter to Pierre d'Ailly, in which he included a list of proposals for the reform of academic theology. In these proposals, Gerson states that "pointless teachings that are fruitless or superficial are not to be dealt with by the theological community", as these, in his opinion, distract theologians from the study of those things that are necessary for salvation, give the non-theological community the impression that theology is by definition a discipline concerned with such useless teachings, and expose theologians to the ridicule of the other faculties, who regard them as "dreamers" who "know nothing about solid truth and morals and the Bible" and "say the most unbelievable and absurd things, which are said to follow from their senseless fictions". Such things, according to the Chancellor, "scandalize" theology, and undermine its authority over the other faculties.<sup>54</sup>

Gerson's writings were highly influential at Vienna and deeply impressed the discourse of monastic and clerical reform in Austria.<sup>55</sup>

---

Imbach, R. *Laien in der Philosophie des Mittelalters*. Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1989; Oberman, H. "Die Verlehrten die Verkehrten: Popular Response to Learned Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation" in Ozment, S., ed. *Religion and Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation*. Kirksville, Mo: Sixteenth-Century Journal Publishers, 1989, 43–63; Ozment, E. *Mysticism and Dissent. Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ozment, S. ed. and trans. *Jean Gerson. Selections from A Deo exivit, Contra curiositatem studentium and De mystica theologia speculativa*. Leiden: Brill, 1969.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. McGuire, B., ed. and trans. *Jean Gerson. Early Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998, pp. 172–173.

<sup>55</sup> Albrecht V had sought unsuccessfully to gain Gerson for the University of Vienna. Martin writes that "his [Gerson's] importance for Vienna theologians is undeniable", and in particular that "Kempf's dependence on and appreciation for Gerson can scarcely be overestimated [...]." Martin (1992), pp. 42; 91.

As such, the debate over mystical theology centred at Tegernsee was very much a debate about religious and theological reform, and that Cusanus' abandonment of the conciliarist cause should be used as an attack against him in the context of the debate is from this perspective not at all strange. What Vincent would in effect say was that, because Cusanus did not embrace reform (which was to Vincent synonymous with conciliarism),<sup>56</sup> he could not possibly understand mystical theology. In the Carthusian's mind, only a radically affective approach to mystical theology could transcend the excesses of the academics (among whom he counted Cusanus) and be a true reform theology.

### *Conciliarism in Aggsbach's Criticism*

Unlike Johannes Wenck, Vincent of Aggsbach does not refrain from openly using conciliarism as an attack against Cusanus, and writes, in his *Impugnatorium* of December 1454, that Cusanus was opposed to the Holy Spirit which had unified the council at Basel, and that, not content merely to abandon the council, he had then proceeded actively to work against the Church.<sup>57</sup> He viewed Cusanus' switch to support of Eugene as a crassly opportunistic move, and accused him of forging his career off of it and becoming fat and rich at the Church's expense.<sup>58</sup> However, Vincent's conciliarist grudge against Cusanus goes back considerably further than this: In a letter to Schlitpacher from 1451, when Cusanus was in Austria as papal legate, Vincent had already complained bitterly about Cusanus' recent elevation to cardinal, his dispensation of the jubilee indulgence, and his program for religious reform in Germany:

I send back the copy of the decree of Nicholas of Cusa, of which decree nothing good will come. For in fact I have many conjectures about him, none of

---

<sup>56</sup> Evinced by his exclamation: « quasi Papa sine Concilijs vellet et posset Dei Ecclesiam reformare. » Letter to Schlitpacher, June 26, 1459; Pez (1729), p. 338; or below, with English translation, Appendix 5.

<sup>57</sup> « Item, ipse restitit et hodie resistit Spiritui Sancto, Spiritus enim sanctus congregaverat concilium Basiliense, quod ipse pro viribus dissipavit, quam dissipacionem et cuncta que contra ecclesiam fecit, ut a viro fide digno percepi, hodie iustificare non cessat. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher of Dec. 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 208; Cusanus had already in 1439 admonished a Carthusian monastery, in a long letter, to abandon conciliarism and give support to Eugene. This letter is edited in Koch, J. *Cusanus-Texte IV. Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Cues. Erste Sammlung*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1944, 36–45.

<sup>58</sup> « Item, idem auctor est vir magnus corpore, magnus animo, magnus sciencia, magnus eloquencia, magnus in beneficijs, pinguis in divicijs, altus in honoribus [...]. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher of Dec. 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 208; or below, Appendix 3.

which are good, which I nevertheless do not wish to commend to writing. If that cardinal Nicholas is the Cusa whom Aeneas [i.e., Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini] depicts in his 'Dialogue' evidently between him and Stephan of Novara, then I have no hope that from such a pipe a good melody pleasing to the church could ever be formed. If that is him, then what would signify his creation or ascension to cardinal; what [would signify] the reformation of the religious in Germany, which should be managed by this same [Cusa]? Likewise, even someone of mediocre intelligence can easily intuit what [will happen with] the dispensation of the jubilee indulgences recently given or [still] to be given. For it is and will be entirely "the business that walketh in the dark".<sup>59</sup>

In this letter, Vincent mocks the notion of Cusanus being able to carry out an effective campaign of church reform independently of the Council, and insinuates that his legation is merely a pretext for the collection of money from the sale of jubilee indulgences, which the new Cardinal will no doubt pocket for himself.

In a further letter to Schlitpacher of May 23, 1455, Vincent bemoans the recent election of Pope Calixtus III (April 8, 1455), saying that he, like his predecessors Eugene IV and Nicholas V, would probably not call a general election.<sup>60</sup> And in a letter of March 8, 1455, he is seen further complaining about the defeat of the conciliarist cause, even going so far as to suggest that the fall of Constantinople was God's way of punishing the Greeks for not living up to their agreement with the Council, and for dealing instead with Eugene IV at Ferrara and Florence.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> « Remitto copiam decreti Nicolai Chusa, de quo decreto <nihil> boni <fiet>; Eze. De ipso namque habeo coniecturas multas, nullas tamen bonas, quas tamen nolo litteris commendare. Si cardinalis ille Nicholaus est ille Chusa, de quo Eneas vertit figuram 'Dyalogi' sui, inter ipsum videlicet et quendam Stephanum Nouariensem, tunc non est mihi spes, quod per talem fistulam unquam bonus concentus ecclesiam letificans possit formari. Quod si ille est, tunc quid significet ipsius creatio vel assumptio in cardinalem, quid reformatio religionum in Alemannia per eundem procuranda, quid denique gracia iubilei noviter data vel danda, eciam mediocriter intelligens poterit faciliter intueri Est enim et erit totum <negocium in tenebris perabulans> [re. Ps. 90:6] » Letter of February 25, 1451. *Acta Cusana*, nr. 1057, p. 760; previously edited in Pez [1759], pp. 327–328.

<sup>60</sup> See Pez (1729), p. 330.

<sup>61</sup> « Dilecte mi Pater, scitis, quod Ecclesia Dei semper amaritudines habuit et habet. Primo ab imperatoribus et paganis habuit amaritudinem amaram; post quos habuit ab haereticis amariorem: tandem a filijs, Simoniacis, Generalium Conciliorum Auctoritatis conculcatoribus, et scandalosis Rectoribus habet amaritudinem amarissimam. [...] Ipse enim Teucer servie fecit exercitum suum multum valde in obsidionem et acquisitionem urbis Constantinopolitanae, quae pacta inita cum Concilio Basileensi, sciente et favente Papa tunc existente, irrita fecit: et merces condigna huic servituti non est sibi data. Quis scit, si forte pro huiusmodi salario recompensando Dominus sibi tradiderit Romam et Italiam spoliandas? » Pez (1729), pp. 330–331.

That Vincent also bore resentment towards Cusanus long after the *Impugnatorium* is clear from a letter he wrote to Schlitpacher five years later (June 26, 1459), in which he continues to rail about Cusanus' betrayal of the Council and alleged corruption:

When, according to the saying of the Lord, the tree must be known by its fruit, then I can find nothing praiseworthy about your Cusa, whom you mention so often in your letters, but only things to complain about. I know certainly that it was not necessary and is not necessary to make much fuss about him and his works. For I know that he abandoned the council of Basel, adhered to its enemy; fought the council and brought the Greeks—with whom he undertook a legation—not to Basel, but to Ferrara. Likewise I know that in Germany, after the jubilee, he accumulated money under the pretext of indulgences, and once instituted a false and illusory visitation in a certain location, in deception of the holy general Council [...].<sup>62</sup>

One senses here how much it annoyed Vincent to receive letters from the other brothers—men who had devoted their lives to monastic reform—full of praise for the Cardinal and his treatises. From the above passage it is clear that, due to his “betrayal” of the Council, Vincent regarded not only everything Cusanus had done but everything he might do as ‘fruit of the poison tree’ and *prima facie* corrupt. On the flip side, conciliarism was undoubtedly the reason for Vincent’s more moderate criticism of Marquard Sprenger, whose fervent defense of the Basel Council he praised in a September 27, 1455 letter to Geisenfeld.<sup>63</sup> Even in his attack on Marquard in the *Impugnatorium*,<sup>64</sup> Vincent expresses surprise that “so praiseworthy and honest a man as Marquard” could err so greatly about mystical theology.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> « Ex quo secundum dictum Salvatoris arbores ex fructibus debent cognosci, cum de vestro Chusa, de quo in vestris scedulis saepe mentionem fecistis et facitis, nihil laude dignum, sed solum, de quo gemendum sit, sciam, non fuit nec est necesse, de eo vel de suis opusculis toties facere mentionem. Scio namque, quod a Concilio Basileensi recessit, adversario Concilij adhaesit, Concilium impugnans, ad Graecos legatione functus ipsos non ad Basileam, sed ad Ferrariam adduxit. Scio etiam, quod in Allemannia post iubiileum sub praetextu indulgentiarum pecunias congregavit, et quandam fictam et illusoriam visitationem in delusionem sacrorum generalium Conciliorum [...] in certis locis instituit. » Pez (1729), p. 338.

<sup>63</sup> « Laudavi hunc virum et licet corporaliter nunquam visum intense amavi videns in scriptis suis contra tria puncta unitoris ecclesiastici et contra detrahentes olim sacro Basiliensi concilio ipsum pro ecclesia ferventer zelare [...]. » Vansteenbergh (1918), p. 218.

<sup>64</sup> More precisely, in the attack on Marquard which directly follows the *Impugnatorium* of learned ignorance, in the same letter to Schlitpacher of Dec. 19, 1454.

<sup>65</sup> Specifically, his wonder is that Marquard would cast suspicion upon the works of Hugh of Balma, which to Vincent represented the definitive view of mystical theology: « Miror valde de tam laudabili et probro viro Marquardo, quod contra doctrinam sapientis

The Concordat of Vienna in 1448 effectively marked the victory of the papacy over the conciliarist movement,<sup>66</sup> but Vincent's letters show that he remained a vocal supporter until at least 1460. Nevertheless, while it is easy to receive an impression of Vincent as a lone, pathetic voice defending conciliarism long after all those around him had fully abandoned it and embraced papal supremacy, it was not at all the case that he was the only one who felt such resentment. As Stieber writes:

Neither the changes in papal ceremonial nor the writings of Italian theologians and canonists eager for promotion at the Roman Curia nor, for that matter, the number of pilgrims who visited Rome during the papal jubilee of 1450, justify overlooking the fact that north of the Alps many were bitterly disillusioned with the papacy and resentful of its role in defeating the conciliar movement.<sup>67</sup>

Nor was Vincent the only one to openly voice his grievances. Among others, Erfurt theologians Heinrich Toke and Matthias Doering continued into the 1450's to publicly defend the conciliarist cause through their writings.<sup>68</sup> And the so-called 'gravamina' of the German nation against the Roman Curia, which developed between the end of the Basel Council in 1449 and the beginning of the Reformation, represent a further expression of this lingering resentment.<sup>69</sup> Thus, far from dying out, conciliarism continued to simmer away during this period, and would ultimately boil over in the Protestant Reformation. However, as Stieber points out, the practical reality that career advancement depended upon preferment from those in positions of authority in church and state tended to quell

---

quesivit impietatem in domo iusti, reddendo scripta Hugonis suspecta, dum dicit ea caute esse legenda, ac dum asserit ea errori Grecorum favere. » Vansteenbergh (1918), p. 206; or see below, with English translation, Appendix 3.

<sup>66</sup> The Concordat of Vienna, concluded by Nicholas V, revoked restrictions on papal power, especially regarding taxation and the collection of income from benefices, which had been established at the councils of Constance and Basel. The Concordat became a source of lasting resentment in the Germanies and was a significant factor in the success of the Reformation. For more details on the Concordat of Vienna and its consequences, see Stieber (1978), pp. 313–21.

<sup>67</sup> Stieber (1978), p. 333. Baum also writes: "In Vinzenz von Aggsbach kann man so etwas wie das Sprachrohr der innerkirchlichen Opposition gegen Cusanus in Österreich sehen." Baum (1983), p. 78.

<sup>68</sup> On these, and other attempts to revive the conciliarist movement after 1450, see Stieber (1978), pp. 337–38, esp. n. 7.

<sup>69</sup> These 'grievances' were directed especially against the regime introduced by the Concordat of Vienna, which had set aside the reform decrees of the Council of Basel. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 340–342.

outspoken opposition to papal supremacy after 1448, and may account for the relative paucity of critics as outspoken as Vincent.<sup>70</sup>

*Reception of Cusanus' Works in the Monasteries,  
and the Development of the Debate*

Cusanus first visited the monastery at Tegernsee in May–June 1452, where he stayed for three days.<sup>71</sup> He left behind copies of sermons preached in Mainz in 1446, which were copied and studied.<sup>72</sup> This initial visit fostered warm relations between Cusanus and the monks, and his name was recorded on a list of “Verbrüdernten”, reserved for those who had made a special gift or contribution to the monastery.<sup>73</sup> Contact between Cusanus and the monastery had however begun somewhat earlier, as Cusanus had been in correspondence with Abbot Caspar Aindorffer since 1451. Bernard of Waging had also written his *Laudatorium doctae ignorancie* in 1451,<sup>74</sup> indicating that Cusanus’ works were well known and popular at the monastery prior to his personal contact with its inhabitants.

It is clear that a debate about mystical theology was already brewing at Tegernsee, and sometime prior to September 22, 1452, Abbot Aindorffer wrote to Cusanus asking the latter’s advice on matters of mystical theology, on behalf of the Tegernsee brothers:

---

<sup>70</sup> In this connection, Stieber ties Vincent’s ongoing support of conciliarism to the fact that, as a Carthusian, he had no financial interests at stake. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 337, 340.

<sup>71</sup> As recorded in monastery documents: « Cusanus [...] apostolice sedis legatus infra octavum Penthecostes (1452) triduo in presenti pausans monasterio capitulum, refectorium et chorum cum fratribus visitans. » Stadtbibliothek München Ms. Clm. 1005, 127r.

<sup>72</sup> Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 18. On Cusanus’ Mainz sermons from 1445/46, see Aris, M. “Vos Moguntini. Nikolaus von Kues (1401–1464) predigt den Mainzern” in *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* (1998), 191–217.

<sup>73</sup> Stadtbibliothek München Ms. Clm. 1005, 51v: « Item Nicholas de Cusa cardinalis et episcopus Brixinensis, qui dum existens legatus sedis apostolice in nostro per triduum pausavit monasterio [...]. » *Ibid.*, 49r: « Sunt autem dumtaxat eorum hic nomina subscripta, quorum dona aut beneficia sumus specialiter consecuti. »

<sup>74</sup> There appears to be no more accurate dating for the composition of this treatise, unfortunately, and all we have is Bernard’s own statement in his *Defensorium* of 1459, that he both read the books of *Learned ignorance* and wrote his *Laudatorium* in 1451: « Cum tempore quodam, anno domini 1451 currente, libros Docte Ignorancie editos per reverendissimum in Christo patrem dominum cardinalem dominum Nicholaum de Cusa [...] avidius lectitasset, rerum inibi novitate vehementer stupefactus, illectus et attractus, affectu quam maximo in eiusdem amorem et laudem mirabiliter cepi flammescere [...]. » Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 169.



Finally, curiosity or zeal—I do not know which—moves some brothers to present to your most worthy paternity a question for which they have not received a full explanation that would satisfy them. They expected a clearer answer. Since they, respecting in all things the most high and proven talent of your most reverend paternity fully exercised in every theological science, especially the mystical, which is known to very few, desire most avidly and devoutly to hear a brief and firm summary of it.<sup>75</sup>

It is unclear where their interest in mystical theology had originated, but it is probable that their study of *De docta ignorantia* had only encouraged an interest already present. Clear, however, is that Cusanus' reputation for erudition in *theologica sciencia* was a significant factor in their seeking his advice. Their key question regarding mystical theology is precisely whether affection alone suffices to attain to God. The brothers had studied, according to Aindorffer, the writings of Hugh of Balma and Gerson on the subject, but remained confused:

This is the question: whether the devout soul, without the exercise of the intellect or even without a preceding or simultaneous exercise of it, could attain God by affection alone or by the summit of the mind which they call *synderesis* and be moved or carried immediately within Him. The mystical theologians have written many things, especially Hugh of Balma in *On the Triple Way*<sup>76</sup> and the recent chancellor [i.e., Gerson] in many short works; but it is not enough. Indeed even those taught by experiment in mystical theology do not know what is worth saying, even when the mental and experimental taste seems to be commended by God as most perfect and certain knowledge of Him, although unthinkingly and with the intellect almost ignorant, even when no exercise of reason or its investigation ever precedes. But, alas, here they are deceived and deceive, like many; for this reason it

---

<sup>75</sup> « Impellit denique fratres quosdam curiositas an studiositas, ignoro, v<sup>e</sup> p. dign. quaestionem offerre, cuius enodacionem plenarium et ut sibi sufficeret nondum receperunt. Clariorem expetunt. Et quoniam v<sup>e</sup> r. p. altissimum et probatissimum ingenium, in omni theologica sciencia, precipue mistica, paucissimis admodum cognita, plenius exercitatum, preferunt cunctis, eiusdem summam brevem et firmam avidissime et devotissime audire exoptant. » Letter of Aindorffer to Cusanus, Before September 22, 1452, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 110. An account of the letter-exchange between Cusanus and the Tegernseers on this subject can also be found in Haas, A. *Deum mystice videre . . . in caligine coincidentiae: Zum Verhältnis Nikolaus von Kues zur Mystik* (24. Vorlesung der Aeneas-Silvius-Stiftung, gehalten in der Universität Basel). Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1989.

<sup>76</sup> It is not clear how the Tegernseers first came into contact with the works of Hugh of Balma, although Johannes Keck has been suggested as the proximate source. See Martin, D., trans. and ed. *Carthusian Spirituality. The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997, pp. 19–20.



might be useful to consult the wise, understanding, and expert. But there are few who know how to respond soundly.<sup>77</sup>

Aindorffer's concern that there is no sound guidance for those pursuing mystical theology is palpable, and echoes the concerns of Wenck and Gelnhausen, who, as we saw, were also very worried about the potential dangers of an ascetic, inward type of devotion for which no strict rules were established. Aindorffer's concern is this: how do you provide guidance and spiritual care for those engaged in a devotion that cannot even be described in words?

On September 22, 1452, Cusanus responded to the Abbot's question. His answer is not complete, and it will be approximately another year before he finds the time fully to develop his response (the culmination of which is *De visione Dei*, which he wrote specifically for the brothers at Tegernsee as a manual for the practice of mystical theology). Interestingly, for guidance, he refers the Abbot to one of the sermons he had left with the Tegernseers in the previous year.<sup>78</sup> It is likely that he recommended it (as opposed to one of the treatises, such as *De docta ignorantia*, the *Apologia*, or *De sapientia*, in which mystical theology is also discussed and which they possessed at Tegernsee) because it is in the sermons where we find more discussion of the relation between love and knowledge. Responding to the Abbot's query with reference to this sermon yields a different sort of explanation of mystical theology than what we find in the treatises; however even here the Cardinal's intellectual approach is apparent. With reference to the aforementioned sermon, Cusanus writes the following about the role of knowledge in love:

---

<sup>77</sup> « Est autem hec quaestio utrum anima devota sine intellectus cognitione, vel etiam sine cogitatione previa vel concomitante, solo affectu seu per mentis apicem quam vocant synderesim Deum attingere possit, et in ipsum immediate moveri aut ferri. Scribunt multa multi mystice theologizantes, signanter Hugo de Palmis *De via triplici*, et cancellarius novus in pluribus opusculis, sed non est satis; quin et ipsimet in ea mystica theologia experimentaliter edocti, dignum quid nesciunt effari, etiam quando mentalis gustus et experimentalis de Deo commendari videtur utique cognitio eiusdem perfectissima et certissima, quamvis incognite et intellectu penitus ignorante et forte discursus rationis aut investigatio quandoque nulla praecessit. Sed hic heu falluntur et fallunt quam multi: quomobrem sapientes et intelligentes atque expertos consulere foret perutile; sed sunt perpauca qui sane respondere noverunt. » Letter of Aindorffer to Cusanus, Before September 22, 1452, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 110–111.

<sup>78</sup> h Sermon 58, on the theme of the Holy Spirit, *Sedete, quoadusque induamini virtute ex alto*, preached in Mainz in 1446.

[...] in the first sermon about the Holy Spirit [...] you will find something, namely, how knowledge coincides with love. [...] For everything that is loved or chosen on account of the good, is not loved without every knowledge of the good, because it is loved on account of the good. There is therefore in all such love, by which one is conveyed to God, knowledge, although we may be ignorant of what it is that we love. It [i.e., love] is, therefore, the coincidence of knowledge and ignorance, or learned ignorance.<sup>79</sup>

*Love is learned ignorance*—a striking formulation of his familiar doctrine, wherein the affective aspect, which receives little emphasis in the treatises, is highlighted, albeit in a way which affixes it to the knowledge process. Cusanus' position on the connection between love and knowledge is based on the Augustinian precept that you cannot love something that you do not know.<sup>80</sup> However, the situation is rather more complex, since—as we see here—he is not merely saying that love entails some measure of knowledge, but rather that love and knowledge coincide, which is a much stronger position.

Cusanus then goes on to explain the role of faith:

[...] the love of God carries the lover to God only if we believe in Christ. [...] This faith, namely, that man could thus attain divinity, is the highest knowledge in this world and exceeds all knowledge of this world; and this world is vanquished by faith. *This then is the victory of your faith* etc. [1 Jn. 5:4]. And since the simple can be led to faith by the word, therefore, since this is the highest knowledge in this world, by which they believe in God, they are raised up to friendship with God. [...] This is the revelation that is made to many and is hidden from the wise of this world, who love only what they attain by their own wisdom; and they spurn divine wisdom, which is believing in God.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> « [...] in sermone primo de Spiritu sancto [...] reperietis, quomodo scilicet in dilectione coincidit cognitio. [...] Omne enim quod sub ratione boni diligitur seu eligitur, non diligitur sine omni cognitione boni, quoniam sub ratione boni diligitur. Inest igitur in omni tali dilectione qua quis vehitur in Deum, cognitio, licet quid sit id quod diligit ignoret. Est igitur coincidentia sciencie et ignorancie, seu docta ignorancia. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, Brixen, September 22, 1452, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 111–112.

<sup>80</sup> Re. *De trinitate* X, ch. 1, 3: « Quamobrem omnis amor studentis animi, hoc est uolentis scire quod nescit, non est amor eius rei quam nescit sed eius quam scit propter quam uult scire quod nescit. [...] illud enim fieri potest ut amet quisque scire incognita, ut autem amet incognita non potest. Non enim frustra ibi est positum 'scire' quoniam qui scire amat incognita non ipsa incognita sed ipsum scire amat. Quod nisi haberet cognitum, neque scire se quidquam posset fidenter dicere neque nescire » (Mountain, W., ed. *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Trinitate libri 15 [Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina, 50a]*. Turnholt: Brepols, 1968).

<sup>81</sup> « [...] non est amor Dei qui rapiat in Deum amantem, nisi credatur Christo [...]. Hec fides, scilicet quod homo sic possit diuinitatem attingere, est sciencia secundum hunc mundum altissima, que etiam excedit omnem huius mundi scienciam; et vincitur hic

Because the knowledge involved in love is only partial, faith is required for the lover to reach his goal. This faith is moreover the highest knowledge possible. Why and how this is the case, is something that Cusanus has explained in some of his treatises (particularly, as we saw, in *Idiota de mente*), however here it is simply asserted by way of Scriptural references. And here he also advances the notion that faith is how “the simple” [*simplices*] are able to be led to divine Wisdom—a Wisdom, moreover, which is hidden to the clever, who mistakenly think that their own, worldly wisdom is superior to revealed truth. This, more traditional assertion of faith as belief in the Word as proclaimed in Scripture, and as especially suitable for *simplices*, seems at first to contrast with Cusanus’ strong criticism of second-hand knowledge in *Idiota de sapientia*. However no sooner does Cusanus assert the above as he begins to qualify it:

Behold how faith necessarily is required for any vision. However faith is tested by observing the commandments. If, therefore, we find a zealous observer of the commandments of God, and we know him to be a faithful Christian, we believe he could be raised up to the vision, as Paul was [2 Cor. 12:2]. But in rapture many are deceived who adhere to images and think a fantastic vision true. Truth, however, is the object of the intellect and is only seen invisibly—about which much remains for now to be said, nor perhaps will it ever be explicable. Enough, I beg you, for now. [...] One can show others the way that he knows to be true by hearing, even if he has not walked it himself; but one who has entered it by sight [can do so] more certainly.<sup>82</sup>

Echoing Wenck’s remarks about the danger of trusting in personal visions, Cusanus asserts that one may indeed be raised up to the vision of God which one desires in love, through faith; however many faithful and

---

mundus hac fide : < hec est enim victoria fides vestra, etc. >, et quia simplices ad fidem duci possunt verbo, ideo cum hac altissima huius mundi sciencia qua credunt Deo, rapiuntur in amicitiam Dei [...]. Hec est revelacio que per multis sit et absconditur a sapientibus huius mundi, qui non amant nisi quod sua sapiencia attingunt, et spernunt sapienciam divinam que est credere Deo. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, Brixen, September 22, 1452, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 112.

<sup>82</sup> « Ecce quomodo necessario requiritur ad qualemcumque visionem fides; experimur autem fides ex observancia mandatorum. Si igitur reperimus simplicem zelosum mandatorum Dei observatorem et scimus eum fidelem christianum, eum ad visionem uti Paulus rapi posse credimus; sed in raptu multi decipiuntur, qui imaginibus inherent, et visionem fantasticam putant veram. Veritas autem obiectum est intellectus et non nisi invisibiliter videtur, de quo grandis sermo restat pro nunc, neque forte unquam satis explicabilis. Parcite queso hac vice [...]. Potest enim quis aliis viam ostendere, quam scit ex auditu veram, eciam si per ipsam non ambulaverit; sed certius qui visu per eam incessit. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, Brixen, September 22, 1452, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 112–113.

zealous Christians are nonetheless deceived, and in the rapture of devotion mistake worldly images and fantastic visions for Truth. It appears that Cusanus, like Wenck, believes in the necessity of a 'test' for such visions. However, while to Wenck that test was the authority of Scripture, to Cusanus it is direct apprehension of Truth. Asserting that this Truth is the object of the intellect, he hints that genuine apprehension of it is necessarily an intellectual process. It is precisely this process he will elaborate in his subsequent letters. For the moment, it suffices for him to emphasize that while one *can* be led to Wisdom through 'hearing' alone, nevertheless this is a less certain path, susceptible to many errors and delusions. Love, therefore, insofar as it relies on the sort of faith associated with hearing, is unreliable and thus insufficient to lead one safely and certainly to the Truth. The kind of sure guidance Aindorffer seeks for his flock requires actual experience, and this in turn entails a vision of Wisdom which is intellectual in nature.<sup>83</sup>

Meanwhile, Schlitpacher and Vincent were also discussing mystical theology. Aggsbach had likely got wind through Schlitpacher that Cusanus' form of mysticism had become fashionable at Tegernsee, and so, between June 1–12, 1453, he penned the "Tractatus cuiusdam Cartusiensis de Mystica Theologia", in which he criticized Gerson and promoted the mysticism of Hugh of Balma as representing the correct interpretation of Dionysius.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Our position—that Cusanus advocates a strictly intellective approach to mystical theology—is supported by Kent Emery. Interestingly, Emery makes reference to Cusanus' above response to Aindorffer's query about *synderesis* to demonstrate the similarity between the intellective mystical theologies of Cusanus, Denys the Carthusian, and Marquard Sprenger, writing: "[...] probably because of his Thomistic training but perhaps for closer reasons, Denys' own teaching on contemplation and mystical theology falls strongly on the side of Cusanus and Sprenger. This is unusual among monastic circles of the late Middle Ages" (See Emery, K. "Twofold wisdom and contemplation in Denys of Ryckel [Dionysius Cartusiensis, 1402–1471]" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 99–134, p. 107). Emery thereby implies that Cusanus' mystical theology was also Thomistic, and pairs them both against the mainstream of monastic mystical theology in the late Middle Ages. Emery furthermore makes many comparisons between Cusanus and Denys when discussing the third book of the latter's *De contemplatione*, where the highest form of contemplation proceeds by negation, which yet "yields some kind of cognition" (*ibid.*, p. 128). Elsewhere, he maintains of Denys that, "Like his correspondent Nicholas of Cusa, he argued the priority of intellect in mystical union against those who preferred simple to learned ignorance" (Emery, K. "Denys the Carthusian and Traditions of Meditation: *Contra detestabilem cordis inordinationem*" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 1–26, pp. 1–2).

<sup>84</sup> See Letter of Aggsbach to Schlitpacher, June 12, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 189–201. This latter fact is somewhat ironic, considering that Balma was also a major

Vincent objects to Gerson's approach to mystical theology on the grounds that it is too intellectual, and rejects the Chancellor's characterization of the practice of mystical theology as contemplation, which he considers to be a merely intellectual activity.<sup>85</sup>

Vincent's treatise was sent to Schlitpacher, who subsequently sent it on to Tegernsee. In the letter that accompanied this treatise, Vincent urged Schlitpacher to find copies of the commentaries on Dionysius by Hugh of St. Victor and Robert Grosseteste and to study them in their entirety, as he was certain that these commentaries supported his own view of mystical theology.<sup>86</sup> Schlitpacher in turn asked Geisenfeld to look for the commentaries, and it was the latter who, having no luck, suggested to Bernard of Waging that he ask Cusanus. (The Cardinal did eventually send both commentaries to Geisenfeld, resulting in the amusing outcome that the works Vincent prescribed were ultimately supplied by his worst enemy.) In the same letter to Schlitpacher, Vincent also requested that the Melk prior subject his treatise to the the scrutiny of other learned men, so that he might revise his opinions if it appeared he was in error.<sup>87</sup> It was for this reason that Schlitpacher originally sent the work to Tegernsee.

---

influence on Gerson's *Mystical Theology*. On Vincent's attack on Gerson, see also Trottmann (2003).

<sup>85</sup> Gerson indeed regarded the activity proper to mystical theology to be contemplation; however it is clear from his *De mystica theologia* that to him this indicated an intellectual activity higher than rational [i.e., sense-based] thought. See, e.g., Consideration 43, where he explains that the act of prayer through which one performs mystical contemplation "transcends the understanding and the spirit to the extent that understanding and spirit are understood as cognitive, theoretical power." Such prayer "is the highest possible mental and intellectual affection, not a sensual or rational affection. Were it just a sensual or rational affection, then it would not be the perfect prayer which we say it is [...]" (Ozment, trans. (1969), pp. 65–67). Thus Gerson's conception of the role of the intellect in mystical theology appears similar to Cusanus' insofar as both make a similar distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* and maintain that it is the latter which is involved in mystical contemplation. However, Vincent does not acknowledge this distinction, but seems to regard the assertion of any type of cognitive activity whatsoever as excessively 'rational' for mystical theology. Trottmann furthermore maintains that Vincent's objection to "contemplation" in Gerson had much to do with its being linked to vision: "Pour l'heure comprenons la distinction fondamentale que veut opérer le Chatreaux : elle oppose une contemplation intellectuelle qui est toujours censée atteindre quelque objet de vision et une théologie qui étant mystique renvoie au mystère et ultimement à ce qui échappe à toute vision" (Trottmann [2003], p. 178). On the relation of affect and intellect in Gerson's mystical theology cf. Brown, C. *Pastor and Laity in the Theology of Jean Gerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (esp. Ch. 6 "The Mystical Way: Loving and Knowing", pp. 194–201).

<sup>86</sup> Letter of Aggsbach to Schlitpacher, June 12, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 189–201.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Already by September 14 of the same year, in a letter addressed to Aindorffer and the brothers of Tegernsee, Cusanus stated that he had read Vincent's work *contra* Gerson, and indicated his disagreement.<sup>88</sup> He said that anyone who strives through love to unification with God must have a certain type of knowledge, without which God could be neither loved nor reached, and asserted that Aggsbach had misinterpreted Dionysius, who had only meant that unification with God was impossible so long as God remained an object of *conventional* understanding:

And that Carthusian religious [i.e., Vincent], a man having zeal for God, read the writings of Chancellor Gerson carefully and judged that he had not thought rightly, because he called mystical theology "contemplation". Nevertheless, as far as it occurs to me and is found in the text very recently translated,<sup>89</sup> Dionysius intended nothing other than to teach Timothy<sup>90</sup> how that speculation which is turned toward the ascent of our rational spirit, even unto union with God, and that vision which is without a veil, will not be completed *until that which is judged by God is understood [intelligitur]*, as he expounds his meaning clearly in one letter to the monk Gaius.<sup>91</sup> There he says it is necessary that such a one should ascend above everything intelligible, indeed above himself, in which case he has to enter shadow and darkness. For if the mind does not *understand more fully*, it will be mired in the shadow of ignorance [...].<sup>92</sup> [my italics]

<sup>88</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 113–117.

<sup>89</sup> I.e., the new translation of Dionysius' works by Ambrosio Traversari.

<sup>90</sup> *The Mystical Theology* is addressed to Timothy, a disciple of Saint Paul.

<sup>91</sup> Namely, in Letter 1 to Gaius Therapeutes, in which the Areopagite writes: "Darkness disappears in the light, the more so as there is more light. Knowledge makes unknowing [agnosia] disappear, the more so as there is more knowledge. However think of this not in terms of deprivation but rather in terms of transcendence and then you will be able to say something truer than all truth, namely, that the unknowing [agnosia] regarding God escapes anyone possessing physical light and knowledge of beings: His transcendent darkness remains hidden from all light and concealed from all knowledge. Someone beholding God and understanding what he saw has not actually seen God himself but rather something of his which has being and which is knowable. For he himself solidly transcends mind and being. He is completely unknown and nonexistent. He exists beyond being and he is *known beyond mind*. And this quite positively complete unknowing [agnosia] is *knowledge of him* who is above everything that is known." [my italics] Leclercq, trans. (1987), p. 263. Here indeed Dionysius does not reject knowledge of God *per se*, but only knowledge which pertains to physical being. At the same time he refers to a kind of knowledge which transcends "mind and being"—a sort of 'knowing unknowing' which is superlative with respect to either denial or affirmation, and thus transcends all categories of creaturely knowledge. The parallels between this Dionysian assertion of a kind of 'unknowing knowledge' of God who is grasped "beyond mind" and Cusanus' own notion of learned ignorance whereby God is grasped beyond the coincidence of opposites (and thus beyond all categories of human understanding) are indeed very striking.

<sup>92</sup> «Et quamvis religious ille cartusiensis, vir Dei zelum habens, exquisite scripta cancellarii Gerson legerit, et iudicet eundem non recte sensisse, maxime quia misticam

Although Dionysius states that the ascent unto God is completed only in understanding, according to Cusanus, nevertheless the ascent to that divine understanding must necessarily rise beyond all intelligible things in creation. However, while this state is “shadow and darkness” to the reason, there is yet a higher sense in which it is “understandable”. But negative theology alone does not suffice to lead one to this understanding of God:

Although almost all the most learned say the darkness is found when all things are removed from God, so that nothing rather than something appears to the seeker, nevertheless, it is not my opinion that only those who are versed in negative theology rightly enter the darkness. For, since the negative takes away and provides nothing, then God is not seen revealed by it. For God will not be found to exist but rather not to exist. And if He is sought affirmatively, He will not be found except through an imitation and veiled, and never as revealed.<sup>93</sup>

For this reason, Cusanus writes, although Dionysius wrote of both the affirmative and negative (or *cataphatic* and *apophatic*) ways of theology, he went beyond both to teach a higher mode *beyond* the disjunction of affirmative and negative. And it is this “most secret theology” of which the Areopagite writes in his *Mystical Theology*:

But in this book, in which he wished to reveal in a possible way mystical and secret theology, he rises above disjunction even to union and coincidence, or most simple union, which is not on the same level but directly above all removal and addition, where removal coincides with addition and negation with affirmation. And that is the most secret theology to which none of the philosophers approach; nor can one of them approach while the common principle of all philosophy, that is, that two contradictories do not coincide,

---

theologiam dicat contemplacionem, tamen, quantum michi occurrit, et ex textu novissime translato habetur, Dyonisius non aliud intendebat quam aperire Thymoteo quomodo speculatio illa que versatur circa ascensum rationalis nostri spiritus usque ad unionem Dei et visionem illam que est sine velamine non complebitur quamdiu id quod Deus iudicatur intelligitur, uti in epistola una ad Gayum monachum clare seipsum exponit. Hinc dicit necessarium esse quod talis supra omne intelligibile ascendat, ymmo supra seipsum, quo casu continget eundem intrare umbram et caliginem. Si enim mens non intelligit amplius, in umbra ignorancie constituetur [...]. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 113–114.

<sup>93</sup> « Et licet pene omnes doctissimi dicant caliginem tunc reperiri quando omnia a Deo auferuntur, ut sic potius nichil quam aliquid occurrat querenti, tamen non est mea opinio illos recte caliginem subintrare, qui solum circa negativam theologiam versantur. Nam, cum negativa auferat et nichil ponat, tunc per illam revelate non videbitur Deus, non enim reperietur Deus esse, sed potius non esse; et si affirmative queritur, non reperietur nisi per imitationem et velate, et nequaquam revelate. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 114.



endures. Therefore, it is necessary for anyone doing theology mystically to rise above all reason and understanding, likewise by abandoning himself, to enter into the darkness. And he will find how what reason judges to be impossible, that is, to be and not to be at the same time, is necessary itself so that, unless such darkness and density of impossibility is seen, there would not be a supreme necessity which does not contradict that impossibility; but that impossibility is true necessity itself.<sup>94</sup>

Cusanus thus regards his own doctrine of learned ignorance as merely the correct interpretation of Dionysius' supreme mode of theology, which transcends the coincidence of positive and negative theology.<sup>95</sup> And while this clearly surpasses reason and thereby the teachings of all the philosophers, that which is attained through this mode nevertheless remains an *intellectual* principle, in that it is the very possibility of contradiction itself, and therefore the ground of all rational knowledge.

Vincent, according to Cusanus, does not realize the implications of his insistence on a purely negative approach to mystical theology. For to seek God purely through negation is yet to seek him within the creaturely domain, insofar as one fails to transcend the negative-affirmative dialectic which circumscribes human reason. It is only through embracing the coincidence of opposites that one can ascend to the divine level; but this is an essentially intellectual operation which cannot be achieved through affection. Thus a mystical disciple seeking God through love alone will easily go astray and likely be unable to recognize a true vision even if he has one:

It is necessary that every lover rising ignorantly to union with the beloved attain some knowledge first, because the inwardly unknown is neither

---

<sup>94</sup> « [...] sed in hoc libello ubi theologiam mysticam et secretam vult manifestare possibili modo, saltat supra disiunctionem usque in copulationem et coincidentiam, seu unionem simplicissimam que est non lateralis sed directe supra omnem ablacionem et posicionem, ubi ablacio coincidat cum posicionem, et negacio cum affirmacione; et illa est secretissima theologia, ad quam nullus phylosophorum accessit, neque accedere potest stante principio communi tocius phylosophie, scilicet quod duo contradictoria non coincidunt. Unde necesse est mystice theologizantem supra omnem rationem et intelligenciam, eciam se ipsum linquendo, se in caliginem inicere; et reperiet quomodo id quod ratio iudicat impossibile, scilicet esse et non esse simul, est ipsa necessitas, ymmo, nisi videretur tanta caligo impossibilitatis et densitas, non esset summa necessitas que illi impossibilitati non contradicit; sed impossibilitas est ipsa vera necessitas. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 114–115.

<sup>95</sup> On the influence of Cusanus' interpretation of Dionysius on fifteenth and sixteenth century writers, which he holds to be considerable, see Meier-Oeser (1985), pp. 35–36 (2.2.1 *Cusanus als Interpret des Pseudo-Areopagiten*).



loved nor found, and even if found, it is not grasped. Therefore, that way by which someone is bound to rise ignorantly is not secure nor to be taught in writings.<sup>96</sup>

That secure way which Aindorffer is seeking is not to be found in affective theology. However—echoing statements we have already seen in the *Apologia* and *De sapientia*—Cusanus repeats the warning that *all* writings on mystical theology are inherently dangerous, insofar as mystical theology can only truly be learned through personal experience. He further implies that Vincent's insistence on the ease of mystical theology pursued affectively expresses a dangerous overconfidence:

The angel of Satan, transforming itself into an angel of light, seduces the confident person easily. For it would be necessary for the lover to make an image of the beloved that, if he did, he would do it of necessity in some intelligible way, if he did not enter the darkness; and then he would think he had found God when he had found some likeness.<sup>97</sup>

In insisting on love alone, Vincent has failed to see that no lover can pursue his beloved except through some sort of intelligible image. Hence the disciple of affective theology is likely inadvertently to create for himself a conventionally intelligible image (which is to say, a worldly image), and instead of loving God will in fact be worshipping an idol. This caution against images is very interesting in light of Cusanus' soon-to-be-written work *De visione Dei* (subtitled *De icona*), as of course it is precisely the accusation of idol worship that Vincent will later hurl against Cusanus in his *Impugnatorium*; for he considers Cusanus' use of the painting of an omnivoyent image in the practice of mystical contemplation to be idolatrous. That Cusanus had in fact already criticized Vincent with respect to the danger of idolatry, shows that they each believe the other's position to entail the same error, albeit for different reasons. It is moreover noteworthy that, while Wenck attacked Cusanus for thinking that sensible images could ever be left behind or transcended, here Cusanus criticizes

<sup>96</sup> «Necesse est enim omnem amantem ad unionem amati ignote consurgentem premittere cognitionem qualemcumque, quia penitus ignotum nec amatur, nec reperitur, eciamsi reperiretur non apprehenderetur. Ideo via illa ubi quis niteretur consurgere ignote non est nec segura, nec in scriptis tradenda.» Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 115.

<sup>97</sup> «Et angelus satane in angelum lucis se transferens, abduceret confidentem facile: nam oporteret amantem facere conceptum amati, quod si faceret, necessario faceret modo quodam intelligibili, si non subintraret caliginem, et tunc putaret se Deum repperisse, quando aliquid simile repperisset.» Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 115.

Vincent for thinking it is not necessary to begin with them in the search for knowledge of the divine—Cusanus' position once again occupying a middle ground between the two extremes represented by his respective adversaries.

In contrast to Vincent's sharp attacks, Cusanus' response to Vincent is mild and respectful. He regards the Carthusian as well-intentioned and earnest, if misguided. Basically, in seeking honestly to avoid false worship through a strictly affective approach to mystical theology which relies solely on negation, Vincent has fallen prey to a greater error, one which can only be avoided through a—perhaps more difficult—nevertheless unavoidably intellectual process. He ends his remarks about Vincent's letter by saying:

I do not wish to rebuke anyone, but it seems to me that Dionysius in no way wished that Timothy should rise ignorantly except in the way which I have stated, and not in the way which the Carthusian wishes, by feeling departing from the intellect. [...] Any motion, even if it is above itself such that it is unknown, nevertheless is towards union with what is sought, even in an unknown way. It cannot be said to arise ignorantly except by virtue of intellect; for affect arises neither ignorantly nor knowingly unless it has knowledge from the intellect. Knowledge and ignorance belong to the intellect, not the will, just as good and bad will do not pertain to the intellect.<sup>98</sup>

The Carthusian, according to Cusanus, has misinterpreted Dionysius by failing to see that *both* knowledge and ignorance pertain to the intellect, and thus that one cannot ascend to God in ignorance through will or affect alone.

Cusanus then directs the Tegernseers to two of his recent works, *De mathematicis complementis* and *De theologicis complementis* (which he promises to send soon), for advice on how the proper use of images in "sensible experiments" may guide one towards the "theological infinite". He furthermore—no doubt inspired in part by the desire to provide a positive alternative to Vincent's misguided approach—announces in this

---

<sup>98</sup> «Nolo reprehendere quemquam, sed hoc michi videtur nequaquam Dionysium voluisse Thymoteum ignote debere consurgere, nisi modo quo predixi, et non modo quo vult cartusiensis, per affectum linquendo intellectum. [...] qui motus, etsi sit supra seipsum ut sit ignotum, tamen est ad unionem quesiti etiam modo ignoto. Ignote enim consurgere non potest dici nisi de virtute intellectuali, affectus autem non consurgit ignote, quia nec scienter nisi scienciam habeat ex intellectu. Sciencia et ignorancia respiciunt intellectum, non voluntatem, sicut bonum et malum voluntatem, non intellectum.» Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 115.

same letter his intention to send to the brothers a copy of a painting by Roger van der Weyden, depicting an 'all-seeing' image, along with a book explaining how this image may serve as a guide in mystical theology. Through the *praxis experimentalis* which he proposes to develop in this book, the brothers will be able, he proudly claims, to "attain all things knowable [...] especially in mystical theology"<sup>99</sup> This text, which seems to have been completed by October 23, 1453, is of course *De visione Dei*, dedicated to the Abbot and brothers of Tegernsee.<sup>100</sup>

Cusanus' September 14, 1453 letter made its way to Geisenfeld, who then sent it to Schlitpacher, who in turn sent it on to Aggsbach.<sup>101</sup> Vincent expounded further on mystical theology in another letter to Schlitpacher from October 13, 1453.<sup>102</sup> Cusanus, meanwhile, was completing *De visione Dei* in Brixen. A letter from early 1454 indicates that the book had been received at Tegernsee and was being avidly read and copied by the brothers.<sup>103</sup> They reportedly made three copies, including one on valuable parchment, which they dedicated to their Abbot, Aindorffer; and from there the treatise spread out to other monasteries.<sup>104</sup> Geisenfeld also presented Schlitpacher with a copy of *De visione Dei* in a letter of July 22, 1454.<sup>105</sup>

After the Tegernsee brothers had read Vincent's initial attacks on Cusanus in the former's treatise *contra* Gerson, they sought the advice of Münich theologian and friend of Conrad Geisenfeld, Marquard Sprenger. Sprenger subsequently wrote and sent them the *Elucidatorium mysticae theologiae*, in which he defends Gerson and Cusanus against Aggsbach.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>99</sup> « omnia scibilia [...] venari poteritis, maxime in mistica theologia. » Letter from Cusanus addressed to Aindorffer and the brothers of Tegernsee, written on September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 116.

<sup>100</sup> In his letter to Aindorffer of Oct. 23, 1453, Cusanus indicates that the promised text is complete and that he will send it as soon as it has been copied. Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 118: « De hijs de quibus alias scripsi, aliqua cito habebitis; putabam nunc mittere, sed nondum sunt excopiata. »

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 75.

<sup>102</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, October 9? (Sexta ante Colomanni), 1453 (Pez, no. 4).

<sup>103</sup> Letter written to Cusanus between January 15 and February 12, 1454 by Aindorffer, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 119–121.

<sup>104</sup> Including Salzburg, Emmeram, Scheyern, Metten, Eichstatt, Malbronn, Magdeburg, Trier, and Subiaco. Redlich (1931), p. 99. For more information on the transmission of Cusanus' works and copying of them at other monasteries, see Baum (1983), pp. 60–73.

<sup>105</sup> Letter from Geisenfeld to Schlitpacher of July 15, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 218–219.

<sup>106</sup> München Stadtbibliothek MS. Clm 18600, ff. 359r–407v.

Cusanus received a copy of Marquard's *Elucidatorium* from Bernard in early 1454.<sup>107</sup> Shortly thereafter, Bernard wrote to Cusanus again. In this letter, he makes some interesting remarks about mystical theology which show that, despite the reverence expressed for Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance in his *Laudatorium*, he was leaning towards a more affective approach to mystical theology.<sup>108</sup>

Following some expressions of praise for *De visione Dei* and a general statement confirming Cusanus' notion that mystical wisdom lies beyond the coincidence of contradictories, Bernard writes:

I believe too, nevertheless, not impudently, that God can be seen by the eye of love or known more easily and truly, because more intimately, than by being discerned by cognition or vision alone, whether it is abstractive or intuitive, among which, if another vision mediates, which could be intuitive and abstractive, the question is to what the one who knows better could respond etc. Consequently, I believe with the experts, the faithful person can be raised up to God, the summit of the mind, by the affection of love without preceding or actual accompanying cognition. Indeed a blind dog is able to smell its prey even if it is not known or seen. Nevertheless, I believe this mystical love could not be in the mind of a human being without some sort of knowledge of God, since natural love neither remains nor can be without all cognition joined or separate.<sup>109</sup>

One of the "experts" to whom Bernard refers is certainly Gerson, whose *On the Word of Glory* he claims recently to have consulted for guidance.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Before February 12, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 122–125. Marquard's *Elucidatorium* is referred to by Bernard in this letter as the "scripta resolutoria mystice theologie". Bernard writes: « Dirigo etiam cuiusdam michi familiaris magistri scripta resolutoria mystice theologie, ad examinandum eadem. Occasionem recepti idem magister ex scriptis cuiusdam prioris cartusiensis contra cancellarium Iohannem de Gersona, que scripta etiam dudum v. Rev<sup>me</sup> p. disposui per nuncium presentari [...] » (p. 123).

<sup>108</sup> Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 130–133.

<sup>109</sup> « Credo iterum, non tamen proterve, per amoris oculum videri Deum sive cognosci facilius ac verius, quia intimius, quam cognitione aut visione sola speculari, sit abstractiva, sitve intuitiva, inter quas visio alia si mediet, que scilicet intuitiva et abstractiva esse possit, questio est, ad quam respondeat qui melius scit, etc. Credo proinde, cum expertis, fidelis apicem mentis per affectum amoris in Deum superferri sine previa vel comite actuali cognitione; valet siquidem canis cecus suam odorare predam etiam cognitione non cognitam nec visam. Nichilominus credo amorem hunc mysticum in hominis mente stare non posse sine Dei qualicumque cognitione, cum etiam amor naturalis nec maneat, nec fiat absque omni cognitione coniuncta vel separata. » Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 132.

<sup>110</sup> In the same letter he writes of his frustration in seeking to achieve mystical experience of the divine: « Fide percipio, sed nequaquam experimento; itaque credo, adiuvet

Bernard's position here seems to be that, although there is a necessarily cognitive aspect to mystical experience, in that God is "the summit of the mind", nevertheless understanding is not a necessary concomitant of ascent to that summit, which can be attained purely through love, just as a dog sniffs out unseen prey. Bernard admits to not fully understanding the Cardinal's writings, and the strictly affective route seems to appeal to him more because it is plainer and simpler.

Bernard subtly indicates his doubts about *De visione Dei* when he writes:

Rightly this [text] alone would suffice for any devout simple person, although some things occur curiously to one who reasons and inquires subtly, which disturbs the soul of the investigator a little bit but not in every way. In His own time, God directing, when your most reverend paternity spends some days with us, a fuller discussion will be held about these things.<sup>111</sup>

He asserts that the other brothers at Tegernsee are also confused and "wish to have clearer resolution".<sup>112</sup> Their confusion refers in particular to some remarks Cusanus made in a February 12, 1454 letter to Aindorffer, wherein he had praised the brothers' desire to "grasp charity absolutely", and used the analogy of a hunting dog to describe the search for God. The hunting dog, Cusanus wrote, would not seek the hare unless it had "some impression of its species"; and so it is with our intellectual nature, which is "moved towards the truth as along its path".<sup>113</sup> He affirms in this letter that "the shortest and most secure way is love" (*brevissima via et securissima est dilectio*), but adds immediately: "Whoever is known by God thus knows God. Nothing unknown is loved. Love, therefore, leads to embracing the

---

Deus cum cancellario novo in opusculo *De glorie verbo*, hec fieri posse que scribo, sed solum in gradu cognitionis vel amoris supremo, in caligine scilicet, ubi fides, caritas et spes aguntur, non agunt, ubi amoris summa defectio eiusdem est summa refectio, ubi cognitionis omnimoda privatio est eiusdem omnimoda positio, ubi affirmatio est ipsa negatio, ubi ignorantia scientia est. » Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 131.

<sup>111</sup> « Sufficeret merito hic solus simpliciano cuique devoto, quamquam curiose ratiocinanti atque subtiliter investiganti quedam in eodem occurrant que scrutatoris animam aliquantulum turbant, sed non usque(qua)que. Suo tempore, Deo dirigente, dum vestra p. r. apud nos per dies aliquot moram fecerit, de hijs collatio copiosior erit habenda. » Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 132.

<sup>112</sup> « Sed non omnes capiunt hoc verbum et vellent habere resolutionem clariorem. » Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 132–133.

<sup>113</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, February 12, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 122–123.

known.”<sup>114</sup> His point here is that love is impressed upon our nature as a vestige of divine Wisdom, such that we naturally desire God even though we do not yet know Him, just as a dog instinctively seeks a hare which it has never seen. He wants the brothers to see that love is an intrinsic part of the knowledge-process, and that it is in *this* sense that love is “the shortest and most secure way”; however, Bernard and the others seem not quite to have grasped the Cardinal’s intention.

In his letter, Bernard describes the brothers as hunting dogs running excitedly to and fro, indeed catching the scent of many sweet-smelling things, but having no clear understanding of what it is they smell. Their vision of these things is as yet “blurred, half-blind and obscure”, and as such they require a ‘beryllus’ to sharpen their sight.<sup>115</sup> Cusanus responded to Bernard’s letter on March 18, 1454.<sup>116</sup> He is sympathetic regarding the brothers’ confusion but disagrees with Bernard’s remarks about affection and reiterates his stance on the role of the intellect in mystical theology. He makes his case in a string of short sentences, supplemented by quotations from Scripture and Augustine, and one senses he is trying to simplify the matter as much as possible. The basic argument is however the same as in previous writings, namely, that there is no seeking without a measure of knowing, and that loving and knowing ultimately coincide.<sup>117</sup> He does concede “it is true that God does not require from us that we know Him, because this is not in our power”, nevertheless “He wishes that we love Him as far as possible”, and love culminates in a vision which “enfolds within itself every way of attaining God”.<sup>118</sup> However, he is in a hurry, he

---

<sup>114</sup> « Qui enim diligit Deum, hic cognitus est ab eo; qui a Deo cognitus est, hic Deum cognoscit, nichil enim incognitum amatur. Dilectio igitur ducit ad amplexum cogniti. » Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, February 12, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 122.

<sup>115</sup> Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Between February 12 and March 18, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 130–133. This latter remark is of course a reference to Cusanus’ treatise *De beryllo*, which the Cardinal had promised the brothers some time earlier, and for the sending of which they regularly urged him in their letters. Notable in this respect is how the motif of the ‘beryllus’, or lens, was a direct response to the problems experienced by the Tegnenseers. The treatise *De beryllo*, which handles no new themes, was written with the sole intent of clarifying problems and issues handled in his previous treatises.

<sup>116</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, Brixen, March 18, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 134–135.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> « Verum est quod Deus non exigit a nobis ut ipsum cognoscamus, quia hoc est in potestate nostra; sed vult quod ipsum amamus secundum possibilitatem [...]. [...] sic etiam videre Deum complicat in se, quia ultima perfectio, omnem modum attingendi Deum [...]. » Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, Brixen, March 18, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 135.

says, and so these statements will have to suffice for the moment. In fact, he will not address the issue of mystical theology again in his correspondence for more than a year.

On July 15, 1454, Geisenfeld wrote to Schlitpacher, relating Cusanus' response to the Melk prior's request (*via* Geisenfeld) for commentaries on Dionysius as well as for Cusanus' opinion about Vincent's treatise *contra* Gerson.<sup>119</sup> In this letter, he also included a copy of *De visione Dei* and promised to send Sprenger's *Elucidatorium*. By the summer of 1454, Cusanus was clearly feeling the strain of contending with Duke Sigismund over his bishopric at Brixen, and wrote a letter to Bernard in which he asks for the prayers of the brothers, that he might be "freed from the disorders of the world".<sup>120</sup> In early September, Bernard responded with a letter including a long excursus on the virtues of the detached life.<sup>121</sup> He also expresses his pleasure that Cusanus liked his *Laudatorium*, which he says he plans to augment and improve. That Cusanus didn't receive or read Bernard's encomium until 1454 may be due to the latter's reported shyness, which had for a long time prevented him from directly contacting the Cardinal.<sup>122</sup> In a letter from September 9, 1454, perhaps encouraged by Bernard's praise of the detached life, an exhausted Cusanus announces his desire to give up his Brixen bishopric.<sup>123</sup>

The debate over mystical theology began to heat up following Vincent's December 19, 1454 letter to Schlitpacher, in which the former attacked Gerson, Marquard Sprenger, and Cusanus—in that section of the letter known as the *Impugnatorium laudatorii doctae ignorantiae*.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Letter of Geisenfeld to Schlitpacher, 15 July 1454, Vansteenberghé (1915), pp. 219–220.

<sup>120</sup> « Opto oracionibus fratrum liberari a turbacione mundi [...] ». Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, August 16, 1454, Vansteenberghé (1915), p. 140.

<sup>121</sup> Letter of Bernard to Cusanus, Before 9 September, 1454, Cf. Vansteenberghé, pp. 143–148.

<sup>122</sup> Indeed Bernard's first letter to Cusanus was not written until 1451, although he had written the *Laudatorium* already in 1451. Of this shyness Vansteenberghé wrote: "[...] cet homme si actif dans le travail, si fougueux dans l'admiration, ne manque pas d'une certaine réserve naturelle [...]. Il faudra les instances réitérées et presque importunes de Conrad de Geissenfeld pour le décider à écrire au Cardinal Cusa [...] et c'est seulement après avoir entretenu avec lui une correspondance assez longue qu'il lui enverra son Eloge de la Docte Ignorance, vieux déjà de plusieurs années." Vansteenberghé (1915), p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, September 9, 1454, Vansteenberghé (1915), pp. 148–151.

<sup>124</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenberghé (1915), pp. 204–212. Vincent's criticism of Cusanus in the *Impugnatorium* will be discussed in detail



On July 28, 1455, Cusanus wrote to Bernard that he had read Sprenger's *Elucidatorium* and liked it.<sup>125</sup> This letter also contains his final defense of the role of the intellect in mystical theology. His remarks are brief, if not perfunctory, and uncharacteristically consist of an appeal to authority rather than an explanation. He states that those who maintain that love can proceed in the absence of knowledge contradict Aristotle in the third book of *De anima*—where it is stated that love is only moved to its object by the understanding—as well as *all* the theologians, including Thomas in question 28 of his *Questiones disputatae de veritate*.<sup>126</sup> This latter reference is especially pregnant, as it demonstrates how thoroughly Thomistic is Cusanus' position on the role of the intellect in mystical theology. It is thus worth quoting here:

[...] no one can move toward God by any other motion unless at the same time he move with this motion of faith; for all other motions of the mind toward God the Justifier belong to the affections, whereas only the motion of faith belongs to the intellect. The affections, however, are moved toward their object only in so far as it is apprehended; for the apprehended good moves the affections, as is said in Book III of *On the Soul*. Hence the motion of the apprehensive power is required for the motion of the affective [...]. In this way also the motion of faith is included in that of charity and in every other motion by which the mind is moved toward God.<sup>127</sup>

Charity can move one to God only in connection with faith, according to Thomas, because faith pertains to the intellect and only the apprehended can be loved. Not only is Cusanus' insistence that something must be

---

below, in section "*Vincent's tractate against Cusanus: the Impugnatorium laudatorii doctae ignorantiae*".

<sup>125</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, July 28, 1455, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 159–160.

<sup>126</sup> « Qui enim ponunt affectum in penitus ignotum ferri seu moveri, contradicunt Aristoteli, in 3<sup>o</sup> *De anima*, qui ait quod affectus non movetur in suum obiectum nisi apprehensum, bonum enim apprehensum movet affectum; et ita omnes theologi, et S.T. in Questionibus veritatis de justificatione impij, articulo 5<sup>to</sup>. » Ibid. It should be noted here that Cusa mistakenly refers to Q28, art. 5, when the point to which he is referring occurs in the reply to Q28, art. 4.

<sup>127</sup> « Nullus quocumque alio motu potest in Deum moveri, nisi simul cum hoc motu fidei moveatur; quia omnes alii motus mentis in Deum iustificantem pertinent ad affectum, solus autem fidei motus ad intellectum pertinet. Affectus autem non movetur in suum obiectum nisi secundum quod est apprehensum; bonum enim apprehensum movet affectum, ut dicitur in libro III de anima. Unde motus apprehensivae requiritur ad motum affectivae [...]. Et per hunc modum motus fidei includitur in motu caritatis, et in quolibet alio motu quo mens movetur in Deum. » *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, Q. 28, art. 4, resp. (Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita. Tomus 22, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate; Vol. 3, Romae: Typographia Polyglotta, 1977, 592–931.)



known to be loved echoed here, but also his intimate connection between faith and intellect. Thus here we have the ultimate ground of Cusanus' rejection of affective mystical theology: a strong defense of the role of the intellect, taken not from Neoplatonic sources but from the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition as articulated by Thomas. This Thomistic orientation aligns Cusanus' mystical theology with the *via antiqua*, and his attempt to ground his teachings in the authority of the past is strongly characteristic of late-medieval scholasticism.<sup>128</sup>

The message to the Tegernseers here is clear: if you reject this view, you reject the Aristotelian tradition and orthodox theology itself. That Cusanus ultimately uses authority and orthodoxy to buttress his mystical theological doctrine is not so surprising, when this debate is considered within the broader context of his reform works. What we see here is not dissimilar to the way he proceeded in his monastic visitations—where he would first appeal to the intellect, with sermons preaching on the wisdom and rationality of the measures he was seeking to implement, and then, when that failed to produce any effect, bring the full weight of his authority to bear. Despite his warm relations with the Tegernsee brethren, Cusanus' strong conservative strain briefly emerges in this final contribution to the debate on mystical theology.

He nevertheless promises that his sermons, which he hopes to publish soon in a book, will contain further elucidations; but under current circumstances, he complains, it is nearly impossible to work. Indeed, Nicolaus was deeply embroiled in his struggle against Abbess Verena and Duke Sigismund at this time, which by his own admission was driving him to distraction and consuming all his time and energy.<sup>129</sup> His desperation is palpable at the end of the letter, where he writes: "I cannot proceed reflectively. Unless I am freed, I will lose myself. Pardon, Father, if I send nothing, because I have nothing worthwhile".<sup>130</sup> No direct response to Vincent's *Impugnatorium* was ever written by Cusanus.

Cusanus' direct involvement in the debate effectively over, it now shifted to a dispute between Vincent and Marquard on the one hand, and

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Hoenen (2004).

<sup>129</sup> Immediately following his remarks on mystical theology in this letter, he goes on to complain about the Abbess and her plots against him: « Yezabel de Sonnenburg, deposita et excommunicate propter rebellionem, multa contra me machinatur: appellat ad curiam, provocat contra me suos. » etc. Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>130</sup> « [...] non possum recollecte proficere; nisi liberer perdam meipsum. Parcite pater si nichil mitto, quia nichil dignum habeo. » Letter of Cusanus to Bernard, July 28, 1455, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 159–161.

Vincent and Bernard on the other. Despite having expressed his wish in the "Impugnatorium" to speak no further on the subject of mystical theology, Vincent, annoyed by Marquard's appreciation of Cusanus, sent a letter attacking the *Elucidatorium* to Geisenfeld on September 27, 1455.<sup>131</sup> Although the primary target is Sprenger, Vincent also briefly criticizes Cusanus in this letter, attacking the latter's defense of Aristotle.<sup>132</sup> Marquard had, in his *Elucidatorium*, suggested that affective mystical theology was only for "the simple", a comment which offended Vincent. It is true, Vincent replies here, that those who have not been given "the gift of wisdom" can rely on mystical theology in this way, but so must all others; and he refers to the example of St. Paul and Dionysius, who were elevated to mystical theology by renouncing their wisdom.

Vincent followed this up in the same year with another short letter (probably to Schlitpacher) further criticizing Sprenger and "Gerchumar" in general, and defending the mystical theology of Hugh of Balma.<sup>133</sup> In Vincent's 1455 note to Schlitpacher, he had similarly asserted that what "Gerchumar" presented as mystical theology is actually just "contemplation", and opposed this to the correct view of "Vercellinco".<sup>134</sup> Marquard in particular, according to Vincent, had confused the first gift of the Holy Spirit with mystical theology, evinced by the fact that he had defended his position by reference to St. Thomas and Richard of St. Victor, neither of whom made any mention of mystical theology in the works that Marquard had named.<sup>135</sup> Against these authorities, Vincent asserts Augustine and

<sup>131</sup> Letter of Vincent to Geisenfeld, 27 Sept. 1455, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 212–216.

<sup>132</sup> « Chusa vester misticam theologiam pro rem divinam, spiritualem ac secretissimam non recipit nisi concordet cum suo misero Aristotele in 3<sup>o</sup> De anima. Hugonem scribitis a communi via et modo loquendi theologorum recedere. Verum est, sed res ita fieri requirit. Mitto vobis Vercellensem commentatorem beati Dyonisij super mistica theologia, petens ut ipsum commentum una cum commento Linconiensis velitis communicare domino Marquardo, ut ex ipsis sua scripta de eadem materia vel ex scriptis suis illa commenta corrigat et emendat. » Ibid., pp. 212–213.

<sup>133</sup> Letter of Vincent \*probably\* to Schlitpacher, 1455, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 217–218.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> « Magnum chaos positum est inter Vercellinco et Gerchumar, et inter contemplationem et misticam theologiam. Nec Richardus nec sanctus Thomas aliquid scribunt de mistica theologia, nam libri Richardi intulantur unus *De maiori*, alius *De minore contemplacione*. Sanctus Thomas, nec in summa, nec in scripto alio tenuem de mistica theologia facit mentionem. » Ibid., p. 217. The books referred to here are Richard of St. Victor's two works on mystical theology, entitled respectively "Benjamin Minor" and "Benjamin Major". Vincent's claim that they say nothing about mystical theology is due to the fact that in these works Richard speaks of mystical 'contemplation', as had Gerson (whose mystical theology was substantially influenced by these works), and thus they were, in Vincent's mind, excessively intellectual for mystical theology. On Richard, see, for example,

Gregory as men who had written about mystical theology.<sup>136</sup> In the former letter to Geisenfeld, Vincent asserted that, if Marquard had read the commentaries on Dionysius of Hugh of St. Victor and Robert Grosseteste, then he surely would have written otherwise, and encouraged Geisenfeld to send Marquard copies of these works, as well as Vincent's own criticisms. Conrad did this, provoking Sprenger to reply with his "Apologia Elucidatorii", to which he appended a "Complementum apologiae", sent to Schlitpacher on September 10, 1456.<sup>137</sup>

Sometime in the first half of 1459, incited by Vincent's attacks, Bernard wrote his *Defensorium laudatorii doctae ignorancie*.<sup>138</sup> In the same year, he also wrote a work called "De cognoscendo Deum" in which he defended Cusanus.<sup>139</sup> Vincent promptly replied to Bernard's *Defensorium* with a *Replicatio* to the same.<sup>140</sup> Bernard in turn responded to Vincent's remarks in two further letters to Schlitpacher.<sup>141</sup> Vincent responded in kind with two letters to Schlitpacher, attacking Bernard's *Laudatorium* and *Defensorium*<sup>142</sup>, and then set his sights once more on Marquard, attacking his *Apologia* in yet another letter to Schlitpacher,<sup>143</sup> who apparently never tired of reading and copying the Carthusian's correspondence.

Vincent had not forgotten about Cusanus, however, and in a June 26, 1459 letter to Schlitpacher on the authority of the Church and necessity of a general council, attacked him again for his alleged betrayal and corruption.<sup>144</sup> In this same letter, Aggsbach asserts that Cusanus' knowledge of mystical

---

Haberkern, E., ed. and trans. *Richard von St. Viktor: "Benjamin Minor". Ein neu aufgefundenes Handschriftenfragment* (Ger./Lat.). Göppingen: Kümmerle, 2000; Zinn, J. trans. *Richard of St. Victor The Book of the Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity (Classics of Western Spirituality)*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979.

<sup>136</sup> Letter of Vincent \*probably\* to Schlitpacher, 1455, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 217.

<sup>137</sup> Letter of Sprenger to Schlitpacher, September 10, 1456, Pez (1729), p. 331.

<sup>138</sup> Vansteenbergh (1918), pp. 169–188.

<sup>139</sup> Baum (1983), p. 77.

<sup>140</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, August 26, 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 343–346.

<sup>141</sup> Letter of Bernard to Schlitpacher, 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 346–347; and Letter of Bernard \*probably\* to Schlitpacher, 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 347–348.

<sup>142</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, 1 December, 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 348–349; and Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 13? (Sabbato post Lucia), 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 349–353.

<sup>143</sup> Letter of Vincent \*probably\* to Schlitpacher, 25 May, 1460, Pez (1729), pp. 353–356.

<sup>144</sup> The part of this very long polemical letter where Vincent levels these specific attacks at Cusanus was quoted above, in the section "*Conciliarism in Aggsbach's criticism*". In the course of his rantings against the 'heretic' and 'simoniac' Pope Eugene (who may be the one person Vincent detests more than Cusanus), he also suggests that, under the current regime, attackers of the Church are rewarded with curial office: « Ecce qui impugnant doctrinam et declarationes ac Decreta Ecclesiae, promoventur ad Episcopatus, ad Cardinalatum et etiam Papatum [...]! » Pez (1729), p. 336.

theology comes only from book-learning and not out of personal experience.<sup>145</sup> Vincent's remarks here reveal how closely his opposition to Cusanus is linked to his opinion of academic theology as a whole, and are worth examining in some detail. Prefacing his remarks with statements to the effect that it is the responsibility of every good Christian to increase the faith of his fellow devout and help him avoid corruption, Vincent admonishes Schlitpacher for not being more critical of the errors of the *moderni*, and rebukes him for conferring with "Doctors in Vienna", and for sending them his considerations and notes on theological matters so that they can compose statements or dispute about them in their excercises.<sup>146</sup>

Vincent's criticism then shifts to Cusanus, implying that he associates the latter with these Vienna academics. He does not refer to any specific teachings of these "moderni" in his letter, however, and it seems that Vincent is using the word here simply as a blanket term for all doctors at the University of Vienna (where the modern way was dominant at the time), and with whom he associates all the faults of academic theology. As a typical academic, Cusanus is just another one of these "moderni", in Vincent's mind. Having thus made his feelings about academics clear, Vincent then asserts that the real problem with the doctrine of learned ignorance is that Cusanus himself knows nothing about it, since all of his learning comes from books. Referring to those who, in his estimation, are *genuinely* unlearned mystics—like Dorothy of Prussia (of whom he spoke earlier in the same letter)—Vincent writes:

I maintain that they were more clearly enlightened in the doctrine of learned ignorance than Cusa. Their doctrine proceeded not out of the turning of [the pages of] books, but out of the annointment teaching about everything.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 76.

<sup>146</sup> Whether Schlitpacher actually did these things is uncertain; however it is Vincent's allegation here. « Saepe, mi Pater, indignor contra vos pro eo, quod, cum habeatis dona Dei, et sitis potens in scripturis, nihil contra modernos errores zelare videmini, tanquam facta fidei ad vos minime pertineant. Sciretis enim defectus Ecclesiam modo obscurantes clare considerare, consideratos colligere, collectos in questiones et dubia formare, et de his cum doctis viris, saepe ad vos declinantibus, conferre, vel ea ad aliquos Doctores in Wiennam transmittere, ut vel declarationem facerent, vel de ipsis in suis exercitijs disputarent. Credo namque, quod Religiosus Religiosum, Clericus Clericum, Magister Magistrum, Doctor Doctorem, Facultas Facultatem, Universitas Universitatem, Universitates Praelatos et caeteros fideles ad zelandum pro fide sollicitare deberent. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, June 26, 1459, Pez (1729), pp. 337–338; or below, with English translation, Appendix 5.

<sup>147</sup> « [...] teneo, quod in doctrina doctae ignorantiae fuerint clarius illustratae, quam Chusa. Quarum doctrina non ex revolutione librorum, sed ex unctione, de omnibus docente, processit. » Ibid., p. 338.

The over-educated Cusanus foolishly thought that this ‘unlearned’ mystical doctrine could be found in university textbooks and in the writings of scholars; and just like a typical academic, Cusanus has no real experience of that which he purports to teach:

Regarding this doctrine of learned ignorance Cusa himself did not write according to experience but to his imagination. For the natural instinct or human curiosity has the [following] property, that it disdains [already] known things, and tends always to rare and sublime curiosities and sophistries.<sup>148</sup>

Handicapped by his own cleverness, and given to a fascination for obscure and difficult notions, Cusanus ‘invents’ many imaginary things and weaves deceptively persuasive arguments in his treatises, which however do not emanate out of true learned ignorance, but only from his own ‘sophistical’ tendencies.<sup>149</sup>

It must have been around this time that Vincent’s obsessive pursuit of the debate had created such tension in his own order that fellow Carthusian Thomas Papler wrote to Schlitpacher, urging the latter to discontinue correspondence with Vincent.<sup>150</sup> Likely due to censure from within his order, Vincent wrote to Schlitpacher on May 8, 1460, sending back his copies of Marquard’s treatises and expressing his wish to end the debate.<sup>151</sup> He asked Schlitpacher to return or destroy his letters criticizing the “*Apologia*” and “*Complementum apologiae*” of Marquard, so that they would not fall into the hands of Cusanus or his friends; otherwise, he felt, the debate would never end.<sup>152</sup> Despite his request, Schlitpacher continued to correspond with Marquard on Vincent’s behalf, defending the old Carthusian, with whose position he was clearly sympathetic. Marquard responded to Schlitpacher by saying that he should not place too much trust in Aggsbach. Schlitpacher did not pass this criticism on to Vincent, but defended the latter again in a September 25, 1460 letter to Marquard.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> « De hac doctrina doctae ignorantiae ipse Chusa non experientiam, sed imaginationem suam sequens scripsit. Habet enim hoc instinctus naturalis sive curiositas humana proprium, ut nota fastidiat, et semper ad rara et alta, curiosa et subtilia tendat. » Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> «[...] potest de quacunque materia, multa imaginari et fingere, et verbis humanae Sapientiae persuasibilia facere, et tandem talia redigere in Tractatus, qui tamen non ex docta ignorantia, sed ex naturali et subtili ingenio emanarent [...]». » Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> The letter is unfortunately undated. Pez (1729), p. 357.

<sup>151</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, September 29? (Die 8. Michaelis), Pez (1729), p. 356.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Baum (1983), p. 77.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

On October 6, 1460, Aggsbach, having somehow acquired a copy of this letter, wrote to Schlitpacher that he should not waste his Sundays writing letters in his praise. This letter is Vincent's last contribution to the controversy over mystical theology which began with the reception of *De docta ignorantia* in the Melk/Tegernsee circle, and effectively marks the end of the debate.<sup>154</sup>

VINCENT'S TRACTATE AGAINST CUSANUS: THE *IMPUGNATORIUM*  
*LAUDATORII DOCTAE IGNORANTIAE*

Just as Wenck had indiscriminately identified Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance as Eckhardian, Beghardian, Lollardian, Wyclifite, and Waldensian—out of which combination he produced a great, heretical beast called the “abgeschieden Leben”, in the “Impugnatorium”, Aggsbach creates a three-headed monster called “Gerchumar” (Gerson-C[h]usanus-Marquard). Against this beast Vincent mobilizes yet another hybrid, which he calls “Vercellinco”—comprised of Hugh of St. Victor and Robert Grosseteste (respectively, the Abbot of *Vercelli* and the Bishop of *Lincoln*)—which he considers to represent the correct approach to mystical theology. In this treatise, “Gerchumar” is collectively accused of the sin of curiosity and of writing strange and subtle things (*rara et subtilia*)<sup>155</sup>—a criticism which is ironic, given that it was Gerson himself who most famously attacked the excesses of scholastic curiosity and idle speculation in his *Contra curiositatem studentium*. Nevertheless, it is Vincent's contention that the methodology advocated by Gerchumar is guilty of just this, and as such is not appropriate for mystical theology.

Vincent in fact says very little specifically about Gerson in this treatise, as he had already criticized him at length in his previous letter.<sup>156</sup> The “Impugnatorium” thus proceeds quickly to the errors of “Chusa”, followed by those of Marquard. We will focus on the former here. Vincent's criticism of Cusanus takes aim, on the one hand, at the latter's strongly symbolic approach to mystical theology, as presented in *De visione Dei* (referred to by Vincent as *Icons*) and, on the other hand, at Cusanus' doctrine of

<sup>154</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>155</sup> Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 205: « Alii omnes, sicut Gerchumar, locuti sunt inventum, volentes esse doctores rei penitus sibi ignote, quod ex instinctu naturali et vicio curiositatis evenit. Dum enim tales viri [. . .] dant se ad rara et subtilia, et maxime ad talia que sine practica acquiri non possunt. »

<sup>156</sup> In his treatise *contra* Gerson, June 1–12, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 189–201.

learned ignorance. While Vincent had read the former text, his remarks on learned ignorance were based on what he had gleaned of the doctrine from Bernard of Waging's encomium.

Vincent criticizes Cusanus primarily with reference to Scripture and to the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius. The main theoretical point of his criticism regards sensible images: with reference to Deuteronomy, Vincent argues that, just as Moses saw no similitude when God spoke to him "from the midst of the fire", lest we would make idols of him, so too are all images or "icons" of the divine forbidden to the disciple of mystical theology:

Moses, the servant, when speaking to the people of Israel, as it is said in Deuteronomy 4: "You approached the base of the mountain which burned all the way to heaven, and there was darkness in it, a cloud and obscurity; and the lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of his words but did not see any form at all". And below: "You did not see any similitude on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Oreb from the midst of the fire, lest perhaps being deceived you would make for yourselves a graven similitude or image of a man or a woman, etc.". Just as therefore I see that the similitudes and images of all things are prohibited, so the mystic disciple must abandon things beyond those mentioned before and images of intelligibles must be hidden [from him].<sup>157</sup>

Vincent gets this from Hugh of Balma, who used the same biblical example to deplore the use of sensible images in theology, a practice he moreover specifically associates with the abuses of scholasticism. In fact, not simply the use of images in mystical theology, but scholastic theology itself is regarded by Hugh as a form of idol worship.<sup>158</sup> Vincent nevertheless

---

<sup>157</sup> « Moyses famulus dum loquebatur populo Israel, ut habetur Deuteronomio 4: <accessistis ad radices montis qui ardebat usque ad celum, erantque in eo tenebre, nubes et caligo; locutusque est dominus ad vos de medio ignis. Vocem verborum eius audistis et formam penitus non vidistis>. Et infra: <Non vidistis aliquam similitudinem in die qua locutus est dominus vobis in Oreb de medio ignis, ne forte decepti faciatis vobis sculptam similitudinem aut ymaginem masculi seu femine etc.>. Sicut ergo video, prohibite sunt omnium rerum similitudines et ymagine; sic mystico discipulo ultra predicta deserende rerum et occultande sunt ymagine intelligibilium [. . .]. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 205.

<sup>158</sup> See the prologue of Hugh's *De mystica theologia* (a.k.a. *Viae Sion lugent*): "[. . .] just as formerly the Israelites (having abandoned worship of their Creator), bowed down to hand-made idols, so [nowadays] many of the religious and also many of the well-known and the well-reputed (having abandoned true wisdom, by which God alone is inwardly and perfectly worshipped and adored solely by those who love [Him]) have wretchedly filled their minds with various forms of knowledge and with man-made constructions of multiple arguments—i.e., filled their minds] with certain idols, as it were. [. . .] For by this very harmful activity—[an activity] which God has granted to the sons of men—they are



concedes that Cusanus' *De visione Dei* or *De docta ignorantia* would be helpful for "contemplators", by which he essentially means those pursuing scholastic theology. Likewise he feels that the method employed in *De visione Dei* would be valid for disciples of mystical theology in the illuminative way, but by no means in the unitive way (*pro via illuminativa, sed pro unitiva nequaquam*).<sup>159</sup> Here he is referring to the traditional division of mystical theology, derived from Dionysius, into three stages of spiritual enlightenment: purgative, illuminative, and unitive, respectively. Since the goal of all mystical theology is unitive perfection, Vincent's association of *De visione Dei* with the illuminative way means that he considers it an inferior guide for mystical disciples, which can at best lead one to this second stage of development, where the disciple remains at the level of a conceptual understanding of God.<sup>160</sup> Union, in his view, is attainable only through pure affection divorced from any intellectual processes whatsoever. The prohibition of sensible images, Vincent stresses, is moreover the subject of the entire last two chapters of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.<sup>161</sup>

---

miserably encaptivated, so that there is no outlet whereby their souls may attain unto their Creator through fiery affections of love. For [God] did not create the soul to the end that, contrary to His generosity, it would be filled with multitudinous quires of parchment; rather [He created it] to the end that it would be the seat-of-wisdom in which would reside the Heavenly City's peace-loving King, viz., the Most High [Son of God]. [...] Furthermore, [mystical] knowledge kindles the affections and illumines the intellect; but the other [form of knowledge], very often finding a heart devoid of true wisdom, inflates [that heart]; and very often it bedarkens the intellect with various opinions and diverse errors. Therefore, after having abandoned human curiosity that is held captive to the useless knowledge of arguments and opinions, let the religious soul, by longing, ascend through an upward movement of love unto the Fount-of-all-things [...].” Hopkins, J., trans. Hugh of Balma's *Mystical Theology*. Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2002, pp. 17–18.

<sup>159</sup> « Non tamen simpliciter improbo dictum libellum [*De visione Dei*], quia valet contemplatori. Valet etiam mystico discipulo pro via illuminativa, sed pro unitiva nequaquam. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 206.

<sup>160</sup> The *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* defines the three stages as follows: “The purgative way is the initial stage in which one is freed from attachment to worldly, sensible things and in which the senses and sensible appetites are disciplined and mortified. The next stage, the illuminative way, is characterized by a contemplation or knowledge of God. This stage for some individuals is succeeded by the unitive way: the ecstatic union of the soul with God in the darkness of unknowing in which the soul is radically transformed in God [...].” *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Wakefield, G., ed. Westminster John Knox Press, 1983, p. 79. The classic formulations of this threefold path are found in *De triplici via alias incendium amoris* by Bonaventure (See, e.g., De Vinck, J., trans. *The Works of Bonaventure: Cardinal, Seraphic Doctor, and Saint*. Vol. 1. Patterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1960, pp. 59ff.), and in Balma's *Viae Sion lugent*.

<sup>161</sup> « [...] velut patet per duo ultima capitula *Mistiche theologie* per totum. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 205. Namely, chapters IV and V of the *Mystical Theology*, wherein Dionysius stresses that the pre-eminent

The other error made by all three of the persons comprising “Gerchumar”, according to Vincent, is to think that cognition necessarily precedes affection in mystical theology, and that wisdom (*sapientia*) is consummated in affection only having passed through a cognitive stage.<sup>162</sup> Vincent flatly rejects Cusanus’ assertion that there is never love without cognition, which he finds expressed both in the Cardinal’s letter to Tegernsee<sup>163</sup> and in Bernard’s *Laudatorium*. He then extracts lengthy passages from the latter, which he presumes to be more or less direct quotations from Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia*. What Vincent finds most horrifying is Cusanus’ (actually Bernard’s) assertion that learned ignorance *is* mystical theology, i.e., that Cusanus believes his doctrine of learned ignorance to coincide with the doctrine presented by Dionysius in his *Mystical Theology*.<sup>164</sup> Vincent believes that in this work Dionysius presented a doctrine of pure affective theology, of the likes of Hugh of Balma.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, the notion that Dionysius’ mystical theology coincides with learned ignorance, which Vincent considers to represent the lower level of speculative or contemplative theology, he finds “monstrous”.<sup>166</sup>

---

cause of everything sensibly or intelligibly perceived can be neither sensibly nor intelligibly perceived.

<sup>162</sup> « Videtur michi quod tota trinitas personarum in Gerchumar comprehensa in hoc erret quod misticam theologiam, quam Dyonisius sapienciam christianorum appellat, credat solum esse sapienciam donum, cuius actus secundum doctores partim est cognitivus et partim affectivus, ita quod in cognitione inchoatur et in affectione consummatur, et sic in eo cognitio natura precederet affectionem. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 206.

<sup>163</sup> Vincent is referring here to Cusanus’ letter of March 18, 1454, in which the latter disagreed with Bernard’s statements favouring affective theology and emphasized the role of cognition even in love. The letter probably made its way through Geisenfeld to Schlitpacher, who would have sent it to Vincent.

<sup>164</sup> « [...] in quo *Laudatorio* legi quedam que michi horrorem, stuporem et horripilationem fecerunt, que sunt ista: <Inter doctam ignoranciam et misticam theologiam coincidentia seu conveniencia clara videtur [...].> » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 206. As mentioned above, Cusanus himself does not explicitly identify his doctrine of learned ignorance as mystical theology in *De docta ignorantia*, although he does openly connect the two in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, which Bernard knew but Vincent did not. The criticism is thus not mis-representative of Cusanus, although Vincent might not have made this particular connection had he based his remarks on a direct reading of *De docta ignorantia*.

<sup>165</sup> Hugh shares the view that what Dionysius put forth in this treatise was indeed a doctrine of pure affective theology: “For this wisdom, which is called mystical theology [and which was] taught by the Apostle Paul and written down by his disciple Blessed Dionysius the Areopagite, is the same thing as a stretching forth unto God, by means of longing love.” (Hopkins, trans. [2002], p. 18.

<sup>166</sup> « Que sunt rogo ista monstra verborum? In primis dicit misticam theologiam de qua plura falsa promiserat et doctam ignoranciam coincidere et convenire; et statim subiungit

Vincent is outraged that Cusanus would accord the “metaphysics and mathematics” of Aristotle a place within the practice of mystical theology. To allow this, according to Vincent, or to permit such a “coincidence” of learned ignorance with mystical theology, is nothing less than to assert the coincidence of divine and human wisdom:

And [...] if the author of metaphysics and mathematics is Aristotle, then these can have a natural agreement with mystical theology. And if learned ignorance agrees with both of these parts, then divine and human wisdom fall in concordance, so that the wisdom of this world would no longer be more foolish than God's.<sup>167</sup>

It is fascinating to see how Vincent's criticism of Cusanus comes from the opposite direction of Johannes Wenck's and yet yields precisely the same conclusion. For Wenck also maintained that the consequence of Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance was the coincidence of divine and human wisdom. Wenck thought that the doctrine of learned ignorance completely abandoned the philosophy of Aristotle while maintaining the possibility of attaining knowledge of the divine beyond human limitations, and that in asserting this, learned ignorance collapsed the distinction between divine and human knowledge. Vincent, on the other hand, believed that learned ignorance illicitly *introduces* “Aristotelian” metaphysics and philosophy into the divine realm of mystical theology, to which no human knowledge can ascend, and in so doing similarly collapsed the distinction between the divine and the human. Two diametrically opposing modes of attack, therefore, however leading to the same ultimate criticism: that Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance destroys the distinction between God and creature.

Vincent then goes on to ridicule Cusanus for extolling learned ignorance above all other doctrines as uniquely leading to a wisdom to which no one else—no sage or saint of either the Old or New Testaments—presumably had access. This Vincent decries as nonsense, for in this case

---

ipsam doctam ignoranciam non minorem vel forte maiorem cum speculativa seu contemplativa theologia habere convenienciam, et quod omnem theologiam, methaphysicam ac mathematicam in se complectatur. Mira res. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 207.

<sup>167</sup> « Utique si methaphysice et mathematice auctor est Aristoteles, tunc naturalem convenienciam habere possunt cum mistica theologia. Et si docta ignorancia convenit cum utrisque partibus, iam sapiencia divina et humana concordiam inierunt, ut sapiencia huius mundi iam non sit amplius stulticia apud Deum. » Ibid.

statements from Scripture would only now for the first time be verified.<sup>168</sup> But this, he maintains, is what that “praiser” of learned ignorance (i.e., Waging) asserts, when he writes that God is not correctly sought except through learned ignorance; the implication of which being that everyone since the beginning of time has erred who has not known the name of this doctrine.<sup>169</sup>

In this connection, Vincent appeals to the same quotation from John as had Wenck: namely, “Test the spirits whether they are from God”, similarly calling into question Cusanus’ claim to have received learned ignorance in an inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>170</sup> For since the beginning of time, writes the Carthusian, men inspired by the Holy Spirit have spoken “not in the persuasive words of human wisdom” [1 Cor. 2:4]; yet this author of *Learned Ignorance* employs a sophisticated mode of expression (*sublimis sermo*). The eloquent and educated language in which learned ignorance is expressed is itself indication that the doctrine is not to be trusted, according to Vincent; for one truly inspired by the Holy Spirit would not speak in this way.

Here we see Vincent using Cusanus’ educated background against him: Whereas others (like Keck and the brothers at Tegernsee) had sought out the Cardinal’s advice on mystical theology precisely because of his reputation for great scientific learning, Vincent views this as a disadvantage; Cusanus’ learning effectively disqualifies him from being an authority on matters of mystical theology. Interestingly, Vincent names all of the texts of Cusanus with which he is familiar as guilty of this *sublimis sermo*—including the *Idiota de sapientia*, which was a celebration of ‘idiotia’ theology, and in which Cusanus openly mocks the academic pretensions of professional scholars. Apparently, Vincent was unimpressed. Vincent

---

<sup>168</sup> « Deinde supra omnem doctrinam extollit doctam ignoranciam, dicens doctrinam omnium sapientum et sanctorum veterum et modernorum deficere in eis ad que ipsa suum cultorem transmittit. Si per veteres et modernos sapientes et sanctos intelligit patres utriusque testamenti vel solum novi testamenti, non potest terra sustinere sermones istos et destitucione pocius agendum esset contra eos quam disputatione. Iam primo verificata esset propheta Ysaie: «Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam; habitantibus in regione umbre mortis lux orta est eis». » Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> «[...] dicit ille laudator quod sine docta ignorancia Deus recte non queritur, et ea neglecta vel deficiente per devia itur. Ergo erravimus omnes ab inicio mundi, qui docte ignorancie nec nomen audivimus. » Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> « Recurrendum est omnibus modis ad doctrinam illius quem dilexit Ihesus, scilicet Iohannis evangeliste, qui dicit: «Probate spiritus si ex Deo sunt». » Ibid. We see thus that Wenck, Vincent, and Cusanus each used this passage as an attack against the other’s position—all three claiming that their opponent has based their belief on a false ‘spirit’ or false ‘vision’.

furthermore takes Cusanus' (again, Bernard's) assertion that the terminology of learned ignorance (words such as 'coincidence', 'complication', 'explication', etc.) is seldom found in Dionysius or Gregory to be further indication that the 'spirit' which inspired Cusanus was not that which inspired the prophets, apostles, and doctors of the Church.<sup>171</sup>

Vincent's criticism of Cusanus then shifts from the content of the latter's texts to an *ad hominem* attack based on Cusanus' betrayal of the conciliarist cause:

Likewise he quashed and [still] today resists the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit had united the council of Basel, which he dissolved to the best of his ability—which dissolution and everything that he did against the church, as I learned from a trustworthy man, he does not cease today to justify. This doctrine therefore does not taste to me [like something that] emerged through such an organ, nor do I suppose its inspiration was from the Holy Spirit.<sup>172</sup>

Cusanus actively worked to destroy the Holy Spirit at Basel, where it had brought the council together, an action which he moreover continues to defend. Therefore it is unlikely, according to Vincent, that the doctrine of one so evidently opposed to the Holy Spirit could have been inspired by it. Attacking in this way Cusanus' credibility, Vincent thus goes a step further than Wenck had in explicitly integrating conciliarism into his criticism as an argument against learned ignorance: Only those inspired by the Holy Spirit can write truthfully about mystical theology, and only conciliarists are faithful to the Holy Spirit; Cusanus, in defending Eugene IV, showed himself to be hostile to the Holy Spirit, therefore his teachings on mystical theology were inspired by something other than the Holy Spirit.

The true inspiraton for both Cusanus' teachings and his betrayal of the conciliar cause, Vincent explains, is *power*:

Likewise the same author is a man of great body, great soul, great science, great eloquence, rich in benefices, fat in riches, elevated in honours; yet

<sup>171</sup> « Pariter dicit quod in scriptis Dyonisij et Gregorij sparsim non inveniatur, nisi quod rara verba, scilicet coincidentiam, possibilitatem et necessitatem, implicacionem, complicacionem, explicacionem sibi assumit; ex quibus elicio ipsum alium spiritum habuisse quam prophete, apostoli et doctores. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 208.

<sup>172</sup> « Item, ipse restitit et hodie resistit Spiritui Sancto, Spiritus enim sanctus congregaverat concilium Basiliense, quod ipse pro viribus dissipavit, quam dissipacionem et cuncta que contra ecclesiam fecit, ut a viro fide digno percepi, hodie iustificare non cessat. Non ergo sapit michi doctrina per tale organum emanata, nec puto eius inspiratorem Sanctum Spiritum fore. » Ibid.

through the publication of the new doctrine it appears to me that he intends to obtain the glory of a holy name. Lord protect me and every one of the faithful from this strange new doctrine!<sup>173</sup>

Cusanus is accused of being a man corrupt with worldly concerns. Notable is the way Vincent ties the corruption of wealth and power to scientific knowledge, showing that he views the latter as a vice and form of moral corruption. This no doubt reflects in part Vincent's Carthusian background, as the Carthusian order had always regarded academic learning with a certain suspicion.<sup>174</sup> Because Cusanus demonstrated himself at Basel to be a man dominated by worldly self-interest, Vincent claims, one can only assume that he has published this new doctrine for the sake of self-aggrandizement and fame.

The above remarks conclude Vincent's "Impugnatorium" of Cusanus, and he then proceeds to attack Marquard. Following this, he returns to the subject of "Gerchumar", to make some final observations about the errors common to all three members of this 'trinity'. Here they are first

<sup>173</sup> « Item, idem auctor est vir magnus corpore, magnus animo, magnus sciencia, magnus eloquencia, magnus in beneficijs, pinguis in divicijs, altus in honoribus; iam per edicionem nove doctrine intendit meo videre acquirere gloriam de nomine sanctitatis. Custodiat me dominus et unumquemque fidelem ab ista nova peregrina doctrina! » Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> As Martin recounts, Nikolaus Kempf considered the foundation of the Carthusian order to have "rescue[d] professors and students at the Paris university from the peril of academic pride". In his work *Dialogus de recto studiorum fine ac ordine*, Kempf said, "Above all, I think this Carthusian Order is governed and preserved by holy illiteracy [*rusticitas*] and simplicity and by God's grace more than by human knowledge and prudence acquired by study." [*Rect*, II. 18–19] cf. Martin (1978), p. 88. In this connection it is notable that Denys, a close friend and collaborator of Cusanus, was a very untypical Carthusian, who came under criticism from his own order for being too 'scholastic'. While Carthusian literary output was characterized by devotional and ascetic literature, Denys' writings were academic to the extent that, in 1446, he actually faced censure by his order for his unusual preoccupation with scholastic study and speculative thought. He was compelled to write an apology in which he defended the value of his studies, and was ultimately allowed to continue (cf. Emery, K. "Twofold wisdom and contemplation in Denys of Ryckel [Dionysius Cartusiensis, 1402–1471]" in Emery [1996], p. 101). Tellingly, Denys had written a treatise, called *De contemplatione*, in the years (1440–45) just prior to this censure. The view presented therein of contemplation—which he considered to be "the highest human act"—is highly learned and intellectual (ibid., p. 108). This is not to say, however, that the Carthusians were entirely anti-intellectual or anti-academic, and Kempf—whose attitude towards academics was similar to that of Gerson—believed that the presence of learned men was important to the health of their order. Cf. Martin (1978), p. 91. (For more on Denys' approach to theology, see also Emery, K. "Theology as a Science: The Teaching of Denys of Ryckel [Dionysius Cartusiensis, 1402–1471]" in ibid. 376–388; "Denys the Carthusian and the Doxography of Scholastic Theology" in ibid. 327–359; and "Denys the Carthusian and Traditions of Meditation: *Contra detestabilem cordis inordinationem*" in ibid. 1–26.).

charged with weakness of faith; for, in maintaining that cognition is necessarily prior to the fulfilment of wisdom in affection, “Gerchumar” reveal their reluctance to believe:

They ultimately do not experience nor do they want to believe [credere], but they endeavour violently to reduce [affection] to the first [i.e., cognition].<sup>175</sup>

In so doing they moreover cheapen and make common what is a rare experience:

Therefore each person of your trinity wants to reduce that which is most hidden and most singular and as a consequence for the few, to that which is manifest commonly and to the multitude.<sup>176</sup>

Their alleged over-emphasis on reason is considered by Vincent to entail a certain vulgarization of mystical experience, which he finds abhorrent. Rational considerations are guided by logical rules commonly available to all and subject to objective evaluation. Vincent clearly favours the notion of mystical devotion as a radically personal and individual experience—a matter strictly between the devotee and God—and views its association with ‘common’ scientific knowledge as a degradation.

In addition to these corrupting notions, “Gerchumar” also express contempt for the texts of Dionysius, according to Vincent, which they read only to mutilate, their interpretations of the Areopagite only serving to weaken the latter’s accounts.<sup>177</sup> In Dionysius’ mystical theology, Vincent reiterates, the intellect plays no part; rather “in acts of mystical theology the intellect is indeed relinquished, obscured, and is not permitted to become active.”<sup>178</sup> This Vincent emphasizes as the main point of difference between his view of mystical theology (which he believes to be the correct interpretation of Dionysius) and that of “Gerchumar”, namely, the priority of affect over intellect:

---

<sup>175</sup> « Hi ultimum nec experiuntur nec volunt credere, sed conantur violenter reducere ad primum [...]. » Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenbergh (1915), p. 209.

<sup>176</sup> « Volunt ergo omnes persone vestre trinitatis id quod est occultissimum et singularissimum, et per consequens paucorum, redigere ad id quod est manifestum commune et multorum. » Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> « [...] nec dignantur textus Dyonisij diligenter sed truncate inspicere, et ipsos quantum valent suis ratiunculis enervare nituntur. » Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> « [...] in actibus vero mystice sapientie intellectus relinquitur, obscuratur, nec permittitur in actum exire. » Ibid., p. 210.



And so, my father, mystical theology, which surely is a gift of God, is either a gift which comes from a special influx of divine wisdom, or if it is from a gift of God common to all believers, then it can be said that the wisdom of God produces as a gift certain acts in novices and in proficientes, [and] other [ones] in the perfect: or in those things that pertain to the open and scholastic theology, the intellect and affect are used simultaneously, whereas in those things that pertain to mystical ascent, only the affect, by strongly trampling and suppressing the intellect rises to union with the beloved; nor by this trampling does the affect suffer, since after the union a supra-mental cognition will be given to it.<sup>179</sup>

By 'novices', 'proficients', and 'the perfect', Vincent is again referring to the three stages of mystical enlightenment, whereby a 'novice' would be pursuing the purgative way, a 'proficient' the intellective, and only 'the perfect', who follows the unitive way, is a true mystic. In the illuminative way the affect may be active, Vincent admits, but only in conjunction with the intellect. In contrast, "mystical ascent" in the unitive way is a purely affective process, which is achieved only through the utter "trampling" of the intellect. Hence, against Cusanus' assertion that love is necessarily tied to cognition (in that no love is possible without a measure of knowledge), Vincent maintains that the affect does not in any way suffer from this 'trampling', and in fact exists independently of the intellect at the unitive stage.

In sum, we see that Vincent was just as concerned with Cusanus' use of images as was Wenck, however for very different reasons. While Wenck attacked Cusanus for believing that theology could ever do without them, Vincent's affront was at the fact that Cusanus would accord them any place at all within the practice of mystical theology. This is related to Vincent's other main criticism in the *Impugnatorium*, namely, that Cusanus would admit philosophical speculation (which has the same problem as images, in that both are based on knowledge obtained through the senses) into mystical theology. Like Wenck, Vincent thought that the doctrine of learned ignorance entailed an unacceptable blurring of the distinction

---

<sup>179</sup> « Et sic, pater mi, mistica theologia, que utique donum Dei est, vel est ex speciali influxu divine sapiencie, vel si est ex communi omnium fidelium Dei dono, tunc poterit dici quod sapiencia Dei donum alios actus producit in incipientibus et proficientibus, alios in perfectis : vel in hijs que ad apertam et scholasticam theologiam pertinent utitur intellectiva et affectiva simul, in hijs vero que ad mysticam consurreccionem pertinent, affectus solus calcato fortiter et supresso intellectu ad unionem dilecti consurgit; nec ex hoc dampnum patitur affectus, cum post unionem sibi supermentalalis cognicio prebeatur. » Ibid.

between creature and creator; however Wenck was more concerned about the damage such a doctrine did to scholastic theology, whereas Vincent's focus was on the degradation of mystical theology by the introduction of common 'scientific' knowledge. In this connection, Cusanus' scholarly erudition worked against him, which, in Vincent's mind, was just one aspect of the overall moral corruption evinced by the Cardinal's engagement in worldly affairs and rejection of conciliarism.

Vincent defends his position in the *Impugnatorium* on the basis that it represents the correct interpretation of Dionysius, insisting that the Areopagite maintains that mystical experience, at its most elevated level, is purely affective and neither contains nor depends upon any type of knowledge. Cusanus attacked this strictly apophatic interpretation, claiming that Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* speaks of a higher level of mystical contemplation transcending both negative and affirmative theology. This is indeed borne out by Chapter V of the *Mystical Theology*, where Dionysius emphasizes that, while predicates may be both asserted and denied of God in accordance with affirmative and negative theology, respectively, in fact it is most fitting to *neither* predicate any attributes to nor remove any attributes from God, who is super-eminent with respect to affirmation and negation.<sup>180</sup> Cusanus thus rightly observed that since negation is itself a category of human understanding, the apophatic approach fails to transcend the human realm. That the highest level is yet *some sort of* knowledge, Cusanus supports with reference to the aforementioned *Letter to Gaius*, where Dionysius asserts that there is a kind of superior knowledge, or "all-perfect agnosia", according to this super-eminent level, wherein the deity is *known* "above mind".<sup>181</sup>

The incomprehensible nature of the Deity is stressed in the *Mystical Theology*, and therefore Vincent is not incorrect when he makes statements such as "[...] images of intelligibles must be hidden [from the mystical disciple], just as is made clear by the whole last two chapters of the *Mystical Theology*".<sup>182</sup> However his reading is selective, and in disregarding other statements (such as those quoted above), in which Dionysius

---

<sup>180</sup> Leclercq, trans. (1987), p. 141: "It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial."

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 263; cited in full above, n. 91.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Letter of Vincent to Schlitzpacher, December 19, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 205.

speaks of a special kind of knowing beyond both affirmation and negation, he fails to grasp the total picture presented by the Areopagite. One may perhaps construe Vincent's position more favourably with reference to Hugh of Balma, who expresses the affective position more articulately than Vincent. For example, we may consider Dionysius' assertion (in Chapter I of the *Mystical Theology*) that the highest state of mystical wisdom is a supra-mental knowledge:

Here, being neither onself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.<sup>183</sup>

Hugh interprets this passage to mean that this type of knowledge is *completely* distinct from human understanding or intellect. In the prologue to *Viae Sion lugent*, he writes:

But because this supreme wisdom cannot be taught by men, [Dionysius] adds that each [attainer], regardless of the extent to which he is a layman in the school of God, receives this wisdom immediately from God—receives it, beyond all intellect, through the affection of love.<sup>184</sup>

This is likely what Vincent intended by his assertion that “after the [mystical] union, a supra-mental cognition will be given to it [i.e., the affect]”, which will nonetheless remain pure affect.<sup>185</sup>

Both Vincent and Hugh thus held the view that Dionysius asserted two separate and distinct forms of wisdom which do not overlap or connect in any way: human wisdom which pertains to the realm of sense and existence, and mystical wisdom which is the wisdom of God and is in no way graspable by the human intellect. This is nevertheless a rather strange position to maintain, as it is difficult to see in what meaningful sense this supra-mental affective state would still be called *cognitio*, if it did not maintain some connection with human understanding.

While Vincent and Hugh maintain that there is an (intellectually) impassable divide between human cognition and the “supra-mental” cognition attained in mystical theology, on Cusanus' model, the latter remains the principle and source of the former—a position which has greater explanatory value, and maintains a traceable link between divine and human wisdom. In addition, it is noteworthy that Dionysius makes no

---

<sup>183</sup> Leclercq, trans. (1987), p. 137.

<sup>184</sup> Hopkins, trans. (2002), p. 18.

<sup>185</sup> See above, this section, n. 179.

mention of affection or love in his *Mystical Theology*, and thus the position that Hugh and Vincent attribute to him involves a certain amount of interpolation. The Dionysian notion of an “all-perfect Agnosia” which knows “above mind” moreover clearly conforms to Cusanus’ own notion of learned ignorance, wherein the mind, by elevating itself above all opposition, attains to the principle of knowing itself, which is necessarily both transcendent in relation to the intellect and pre-eminently intellectual. Thus Cusanus arguably emerges from this debate as the better reader of Dionysius.<sup>186</sup>

### CUSANUS’ *DE VISIONE DEI*

*De visione Dei* represents Cusanus’ fullest response to the Tegernseers’ queries regarding mystical theology.<sup>187</sup> He opens the work by saying that that he wishes to set forth for the Tegernsee brothers, “the wonders that are revealed beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight”,<sup>188</sup> and promises to do this by means of a “simple” and “commonplace” method through which he will lead them “experientially into the most sacred darkness”.<sup>189</sup> Vincent would surely find nothing objectionable in this initial statement, as it identifies the same features of simplicity, experience, and elevation beyond the senses and understanding that he himself emphasized. The difference lies thus not in the goal but in the method employed to attain it. For in order to accomplish his aim, Cusanus writes,

<sup>186</sup> I say “arguably” because even some medieval writers in the affective mystical theological tradition were aware that they were interpolating affect into Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, where such words were never used. Whether they should be regarded as ‘poor’ readers of Dionysius is thus debatable; however, we may at least acknowledge Cusanus as being truer to the word of the text. On this subject, cf. Turner, D. “Dionysius and some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe” in Coakley, S. and Stang, C., eds. *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 121–135, p. 123.

<sup>187</sup> For the most recent studies of *De visione Dei*, cf. e.g.: Estrada, P. “Dreieinige Vollkommenheit der Liebe und der menschlichen Freiheit in *De visione Dei* von Nicolaus Cusanus” in Schwaetzer, H. and Stahl, H., eds. *Universalität der Vernunft und Pluralität der Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus (Philosophie Interdisziplinär 27)*. Regensburg: Roderer Verlag, 2008, 169–182; Monaco, D. “La visione di Dio e la pace nella fede” in *ibid.*, 21–30; earlier studies include Stock, A. “Die Rolle der ‘Icona Dei’ in der Spekulation ‘De visione Dei’” in *MF CG* 18. Trier: Paulinus, 1989, 50–68; Miller, C. “Nicholas of Cusa’s *The Vision of God*” in Szarmach, P., ed. *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1984, 293–312.

<sup>188</sup> «[...] mirabilia, quae supra omnem sensibilem, rationalem et intellectualem visum [...]» h *De visione Dei* 1, 9–11.

<sup>189</sup> «Conabor autem simplicissimo atque communissimo modo vos experimentaliter in sacratissimam obscuritatem manuducere [...]» *Ibid.*, 11–13.

he must employ some kind of similitude, a sensible image, or icon. This of course outraged the Carthusian, who considered it nothing more than common idolatry. The icon Cusanus finds most suitable for his intended purpose is the image of the “all-seeing figure”, namely, a painting of a face composed in such a way that its eyes appear to “follow” the viewer; that is, whose eyes gaze directly at one regardless of the angle of view. Cusanus calls this an icon of God, because it possesses the apparently “divine” characteristic of seeing all things at once.

He instructs the brothers to stand before the icon (a copy of which he had sent to Tegernsee along with *De visione Dei*), so that each observes the painting from a different angle. In so doing, he explains, they will surely experience how the icon appears simultaneously to regard each of them directly. Now, the all-seeing icon is particularly suited to the practice of mystical theology, according to Cusanus, not simply because it is a good similitude of the all-seeing nature of God, but more precisely because the aforementioned experience is “impossible”. That is to say, when viewing the icon from various angles, one is aware that its painted eyes cannot actually gaze in more than one direction, and yet this is one’s perception. The effect created in the viewer by this optical illusion is what, in modern parlance, we might call a sense of *cognitive dissonance*. Cusanus writes:

It will be wondered how it is immobily moved, and neither will the imagination be able to grasp that it is moved in the same manner with someone coming towards him from the opposite direction. [...] He will believe it, but unless he believed it, he would not hold this to be possible.<sup>190</sup>

According to Cusanus, the unsettlingly paradoxical experience of viewing an image that appears without moving to behold all directions at once will give rise in the viewer to a certain “contemplation” regarding the nature of God. This contemplation unfolds in the following way: Although I know that, in this world, all seeing is contracted to a particular time and space and that no sensible image or icon could see in all directions at once, nevertheless I can, in my mind, conceive of sight abstracted from all contraction in time and space, and thereby of an absolute vision. As it is not the essence of sight *per se* to see one thing more than another, I conceive this abstract vision as all-seeing. Now, since God is more perfect than anything I can conceive in my intellect, I realize that what I have

---

<sup>190</sup> « Et admirabitur, quomodo immobiliter moveatur, neque poterit imaginatio capere, quod cum aliquo alio sibi contrario motu obviante similiter moveatur. [...] credet ei, et nisi crederet, non caperet hoc possibile. » Ibid., 3, 16–18, 22–23.

abstracted from the appearance of the icon must exist *more* perfectly in God. In other words, if the sensible icon *apparently* regards everything at the same time, which would be the “perfection” of the faculty of sight, then “it cannot truly pertain to the truth less than it apparently pertains to the icon or appearance”.<sup>191</sup> Hence this all-seeing vision which apparently belongs to the icon must *truly* belong to God, whose vision is absolute.

This “contemplation”, however, is yet the product of a conventional (i.e., rational) process of “anterioriter” reasoning, which alone would fall short of the highest level of mystical theology. For while the analogy between image and exemplar allows one to infer the necessity of an absolute all-seeing God, such considerations are not sufficient to enter into the mystical “darkness” beyond all images, where only may one *directly experience* the truth of this absolute all-seeing nature in an intellectual vision. There is thus a further stage, or aspect, to this “exercise”, which pertains specifically to the visual perception of contradiction, to the extent that the “all-seeing” eyes of the icon are an enigmatic representation of an unrepresentable truth, a paradoxical yet undeniable appearance whose impossible nature “stirs” one to reflect upon the nature of its cause. In other words, when I regard the icon, I am not only made aware that God must be the absolute, all-seeing Exemplar of this sensible, “all-seeing” image, but furthermore that He must exist *beyond* the coincidence of opposites; for what I see in the “all-seeing” icon, is nothing less than the coincidence of all possible viewing perspectives. Cusanus writes:

Therefore, you [i.e., the icon] stand and you proceed, and at the same time you neither stand nor proceed. The painted face demonstrates this for me. [...] However neither standing nor being moved can properly befit a face absolute from these conditions, because it exists above all standing and motion, in simplest and most absolute infinity. [...] Hence I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek the truth where impossibility confronts me.<sup>192</sup>

In making God enigmatically manifest in the image of something unimaginable, the icon thus shows the intellect that God may not be grasped

<sup>191</sup> « [...] non poterit veritati minus convenire veraciter quam eiconae seu apparentiae appaerent. » Ibid., 5, 8–10.

<sup>192</sup> « Stas igitur et progredieris et neque stas neque progredieris simul. Facies haec depicta mihi ostendit id ipsum. [...] Tamen proprie non potest faciei absolutae ab his respectibus convenire, quod stet et moveatur, quia est supra omnem stationem et motum in simplicissima et absolutissima infinitate. [...] Unde exerior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem et admittere coincidentiam oppositorum super omnem capacitatem rationis et quaerere ibi veritatem, ubi occurrit impossibilitas [...]. Ibid., 35, 13–36, 3.

according to the principles of human reason, and that His divine nature may only be experienced by going beyond the limitations of human sense and reason, beyond the coincidence of contradictories. It is above all in this sense that Cusanus considers the “all-seeing” icon, though a sensible image, to be peculiarly helpful in the practice of mystical theology. The paradoxical experience of its “all-seeing” gaze helps one to overcome the inherent limitations of the imagination, which cannot imagine an all-seeing God, and of the understanding, which cannot grasp an Absolute in which all contradictories coincide (although it may infer its existence).<sup>193</sup> The icon thus provides a tangible, potent “foretaste” of that impossibility wherein the divine resides, and into which the disciple of mystical theology must enter in order to attain a true, “unveiled” *visio Dei*. For God “is not seen unveiled so long as one does not enter into a certain secret and hidden silence beyond all faces, where there is no knowledge or concept of a face”.<sup>194</sup>

What Cusanus’ deployment of the icon acknowledges—and what Vincent arguably failed to recognize—is that the impossibility wherein God resides is a *supra-rational* one; not simply the absence of reason, but the transcendence of the law of contradiction whereby reason is grounded. Thus, to experience the divine nature entails passing through the realm of reason, which is based on sense-knowledge. The icon is necessary, according to Cusanus, because “nothing is understood by a human except in a likeness”.<sup>195</sup> Therefore, the understanding must confront its limits through images.<sup>196</sup> Whereas Vincent proposed simply to bypass this entirely through a purely affective approach to mystical theology, Cusanus

---

<sup>193</sup> It should however be noted that while the “all-seeing” icon is singled out by Cusanus in *De visione Dei* for its propaedeutic function in mystical theology, strictly speaking, any sensible image can do the job, since the Exemplar is equally “enigmatically” present in all images. As Cusanus writes in this text: « In omnibus faciebus videtur facies facierum velate et in aenigmate » (Ibid., 21, 1–2). And of course Cusanus does precisely this in other works, showing by means of manifold examples or “icons”, how one can proceed from the nature of any sensible phenomenon—be it mathematical, physical, psychological etc.—to the realization that God is the Absolute maximum in which all contradictories coincide. For example, we saw him do this with a spoon, in *Idiota de mente*.

<sup>194</sup> « Revelate autem non videtur, quamdiu super omnes facies non intratur in quodam secretum et occultum silentium, ubi nihil est de scientia et conceptu faciei. » h *De visione Dei* 21, 2–4.

<sup>195</sup> « Non enim res intelligitur per hominem nisi in similitudine. » Ibid., 89, 6.

<sup>196</sup> On the necessity of sensible images for the reason and intellect, Cusanus also writes: « Sed quia unitus est corpori per medium sensitivae, tunc sine sensibus non perficitur. Omne enim, quod ad eum pervenit de mundo sensibili, per medium sensuum ad ipsum pergit. Unde nihil tale potest esse in intellectu, quod prius non fuit in sensu. » Ibid., 111 6–10.



repeatedly asserts that the only way to enter the “cloud” which is mystical theology, is to “seek the truth where impossibility confronts [one]”.<sup>197</sup> And impossibility will only confront one when reason is employed. Correspondingly, according to Cusanus, the more actively and aggressively reason confronts this impossibility, the more clearly and “unveiledly” God’s true nature will appear:

And the more that cloud of impossibility is recognized as obscure and impossible, the more truly the necessity shines forth and the less veiled it appears and draws near.<sup>198</sup>

The motifs of *confrontation* and *opposition* are very prevalent in *De visione Dei*, Cusanus writing, for example, that to transcend the limitations of reason involves “doing violence” to oneself, and that the reason must be “overpowered” before one can mystically experience the divine:

Therefore I thank you, my God, because you make clear to me that there is no other way of approaching you except that which to all humans, even to the most learned philosophers, seems wholly inaccessible and impossible. For you have shown me that you cannot be seen elsewhere than where impossibility confronts and obstructs me. O Lord, you, who are the food of the mature, have given me the courage to do violence to myself, for impossibility coincides with necessity, and I have discovered that the place where you are found unveiled is girded about with the coincidence of contradictories. This is the wall of paradise, and it is there in paradise that you reside. The wall’s gate is guarded by the highest spirit of reason, and unless it is overpowered, the way in will not lie open.<sup>199</sup>

Because the divine nature consists in a perfection wherein all opposites coincide, the more “violently” the intellect opposes its own nature with similitudes of this coincidence, the more unveiledly it will grasp this nature.

---

<sup>197</sup> « Unde exerior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem [...] et quaerere ibi veritatem, ubi occurrit impossibilitas [...]. » Ibid., 36, 1–3.

<sup>198</sup> « Et quanto impossibilitas illa caliginosa cognoscitur magis obscura et impossibilis, tanto verius necessitas relucet et minus velate adest et appropinquat. » Ibid., 36, 7–9.

<sup>199</sup> « Quapropter tibi gratias ago, deus meus, quia patefacis mihi, quod non est via alia ad te accedendi nisi illa, quae omnibus hominibus, etiam doctissimis philosophis, videtur penitus inaccessibilis et impossibilis, quoniam tu mihi ostendisti te non posse alibi videri quam ubi impossibilitas occurrit et obviat. [...] Et repperi locum in quo revelate reperieris, cinctum contradictoriorum coincidentia. Et iste est murus paradisi, in quo habitas, cuius portam custodit spiritus altissimus rationis, qui nisi vincatur, non patebit ingressus. » Ibid., 37, 1–10. On Cusanus’ use of the “murus paradisi” symbol, see Casarella, P. “Neues zu den Quellen der cusanischen Mauer-Symbolik” in *MFCG* 19. Trier: Paulinus, 1991, 273–286; Haubst, R. “Die Erkenntnis-theoretische und mystische Bedeutung der ‘Mauer der Koinzidenz’” in *MFCG* 18. Trier: Paulinus, 1989, 167–195.

It is for this reason that Cusanus believes contemplation of an “impossible” icon—of a sensible image which nonetheless defies the senses—is a more productive exercise for the mystical disciple than merely affective worship. Thus while the image of the “all-seeing” icon as a loving gaze that never forsakes one<sup>200</sup> may be a soothing contemplative experience, it is more particularly as an affront to reason that the “all-seeing” icon, according to Cusanus, is an effective tool in the practice of mystical theology.<sup>201</sup>

In chapter 5 of *De visione Dei* Cusanus furthermore uses the example of the all-seeing image to reiterate his belief that cognition precedes love:

You cannot fail one who turns to you; nor can anyone be turned toward you unless you were already there. You are present before I turn to you. For unless you were present and did incite me, I would be utterly ignorant of you. And how would I turn toward you of whom I would be ignorant?<sup>202</sup>

Contemplation of the icon thus also gives rise to the realization of the priority of both the object of desire and, necessarily, some knowledge thereof, without which there would have been no turning in love towards it in the first place. Perhaps through this concrete visual example Cusanus hoped finally to make clear to the brothers at Tegernsee what he had tried to explain in his letters.<sup>203</sup> Vincent, although aware of this treatise, unfortunately does not address this specific point in his own writings.

<sup>200</sup> As it is described, for example, in chapter 4: « Nequaquam, domine, me concipere sinis quacumque imaginatione, quod tu, domine, aliud a me plus me diligas, cum me solum visus tuus non deserat. [. . .] Domine, videre tuum est amare. » h *De visione Dei*, 9, 20–22, 10, 11–12.

<sup>201</sup> Of the other commentators who have described the function of the all-seeing icon in *De visione Dei*, to my knowledge none have so far pointed out the significance of this aspect—which I believe to be central—namely, the way the all-seeing icon forcibly confronts one with a sensible image of contradiction and impossibility. For example, Haas describes the all-seeing icon as a likeness of the all-enfolding unity of God in whom contradictions coincide, which cannot be grasped by discursive reasoning but is visible “in der Dunkelheit der Einsichtskraft (*intellectus*)”. While true, this description fails to account for why Cusanus felt this *particular* image was so uniquely suitable for raising understanding to the level of *intellectus*, since Cusanus states in many places that because God’s nature is present in all his creation, such wisdom can be attained through meditation upon any sensible image. Cf. Haas (1989), esp. pp. 32–34, 42–43.

<sup>202</sup> « Non potes illi deesse, qui se ad te convertit, nec potest quis ad te converti, nisi adsis prius. Ades, antequam ad te convertar. Nisi enim adesses et sollicitares me, te penitus ignorarem; et ad te, quem ignorarem, quo modo converterer? » h *De visione Dei* 15, 15–19.

<sup>203</sup> McGinn fails to observe Cusanus’ efforts to stress the priority of knowledge over love in *De visione Dei*, and mistakenly characterizes Cusanus’ mystical theology as belonging to the affective tradition: “Following an important theme in the history of Christian mysticism, Cusanus held that while intellect had a necessary role to play in the path to God, love was the higher power” (McGinn, B. “Seeing and Not Seeing. Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism” in Casarella, P., ed. *Cusanus. The Legacy of Learned*

*De visione Dei* is Cusanus' most mystical treatise, and it is therefore significant that affect plays so little role therein. Love is mentioned, but plays no active part in the prescribed methodology. It is rather the rational contemplation of a visual image which brings one to the highest state of mystical experience. Love may be a motivating factor in the drive to attain mystical vision, but the search itself is entirely dependent upon knowledge, without which there would be no desire in the first place, and in the absence of which the mystical disciple is unlikely to reach his goal.<sup>204</sup> Notable also in this work is the lack of emphasis on the purgative aspects of mystical theology. Moral virtue is certainly presupposed, but here as elsewhere in his works is of little speculative interest to Cusanus. As we have seen, it is generally only insofar as moral failing can lead to errors of judgment that Cusanus finds it worth mentioning in his treatises.

In *De visione Dei*, we find Cusanus once more treading a middle ground between the positions maintained by Wenck and Aggsbach. Against Vincent, Cusanus insists that theology—even mystical theology—must begin with sensible images; against Wenck, Cusanus stresses that to attain the heights of divine wisdom sensible images must eventually be left behind. A theology firmly grounded in reason (which is based on knowledge acquired through sensible images) will provide a more secure and effective route for the mystical disciple, who by seeking God through faith and love alone may inadvertently mistake an image for a genuinely transcendent

---

*Ignorance*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006, 26–53, pp. 49–50). He acknowledges that intellect is also necessary, but sees intellect and love as functioning in separate and different ways, which is however not the point Cusanus seeks to make either in *De visione Dei* or his correspondence with the Tegernseers, as we have seen. Estrada, on the other hand, seems to recognize the essentially intellectual function of love in this text—writing of how the “perfection” of love consists in the intellectual grasp of the nature of its ultimate source: “Daraus ergibt sich, dass, während die Vollkommenheit des Sehens auf der vollen Aktualisierung seiner innerlichen Kraft, die des Sehens, gegründet ist, die Vollkommenheit der Liebe ihrerseits auch auf der aktuellen Vollkraft ihrer Möglichkeiten beruht [. . .]. Und parallel zu dem, was mit dem Sehen geschieht, muss man noch beachten, dass der Aufstieg zum Begreifen der Vollkommenheit der Liebe vollzogen wird, sobald der Mensch zur Kenntnis nimmt, dass diese Kraft aus einem vollständig aktualisierten Prinzip hervorgeht” (Estrada [2008], p. 179).

<sup>204</sup> On this point I would differ slightly with Haas, who writes that Cusanus dealt with the problem of the relation between love and knowledge in mystical theology by depicting them as two independent but simultaneously occurring movements: “Damit ist die Frage nach der Rolle von Erkenntnis oder Liebe in der in der mystischen Einigungserfahrung wiederum im Sinne einer Gleichzeitigkeit beider gelöst.” Haas (1998), pp. 40–41. In *De visione Dei* as elsewhere, I think it is evident that although Cusanus ascribes great importance to love, he regards it as an integral aspect of knowledge, rather than a parallel or harmoniously-occurring motion.

mystical vision. Unlike the disciple of affective mystical theology, the intellectual disciple knows how to tell the difference between a mere image of God and a true *visio Dei*. On the other hand, in refusing *ever* to abandon images, the disciple would be effectively blocked—not only from attaining the heights of mystical, unitive experience, but also from grasping the truth of that intellectual principle which is the origin and foundation of reason itself. Cusanus' intention here as in all his writings on the subject is to articulate a mystical theology that secures the integrity of both *scientia* and *sapientia* within a unified theological system which respects their distinct characteristics.

## CHAPTER 2 CONCLUSION: EVALUATING THE TEGERNSEE DEBATE

While Cusanus' advice on mystical theological matters had been eagerly courted by the monks at Tegernsee, their actual reception of the Cardinal's teachings, both in *De visione Dei* and in his letters, was decidedly less enthusiastic. Notwithstanding his assurances about the ease and simplicity of his method, Cusa's explication of mystical theology was abstruse and difficult to understand, and it is evident that no one at Tegernsee felt they truly understood it—even with the aid of the omnivoyent image he helpfully provided. The fideistic, affective approach defended by Vincent, though perhaps vaguer on the details of how it actually functioned, was one that everyone could grasp in broad outline.

Cusanus' letters make certain things clear about his opinion of affective theology which are less evident in his mystical treatise: in particular we see that his formulation of the nature and role of love is very similar to his treatment of faith in the *Idiota* dialogues. Just as faith was there formulated as an intuition of the mind's own structure, here love is subsumed within the understanding as the intellect's movement towards its object of knowledge. This highly intellectualized notion of love emerged in his statement that the hunting dog would not seek the hare unless it had "some impression of its species" in the same way that our intellectual nature is "moved towards the truth as along its path".<sup>205</sup> In this way love, or desire, is construed by Cusanus simply as the "movement along the path" of the intellect towards its object, and it was in this way that he

---

<sup>205</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, February 12, 1454, Vansteenberghe (1915), pp. 122–123.

wished the brothers to understand affect as facilitative in the practice of mystical theology.

Cusanus tried to impress upon the brothers that such a movement, even carried out in ignorance or in the conscious rejection of all forms of knowledge, is an essentially intellectual act, since both “knowledge and ignorance belong to the intellect”.<sup>206</sup> To those who maintained the possibility of ascent to mystical union through pure yearning or striving, he insisted that, since yearning and striving themselves are intellectual categories, this is not possible. Hence in the Cusan system, both faith and love are subsumed within the intellect, which is the ultimate category, or form, of human being.

Cusanus’ extremely intellective approach to mystical theology seemed ultimately to be less appealing to the Tegernseers than an affective approach more similar to that of Hugh of Balma and generally representative of the Carthusian order (as in Nikolaus Kempf’s works on mystical theology). The reception of Cusanus’ ideas on mystical theology was moreover complicated by the competing account of Vincent, whose defense of a simpler, affective practice received a sympathetic audience, even if Vincent’s vituperative debating style would eventually bring him into disrepute. Schlitpacher in particular remained sympathetic to Vincent, at least in part because he genuinely believed there was a valid point to the Carthusian’s criticisms.

Perhaps what disadvantaged Cusanus’ doctrine most greatly were its apparent academic leanings (though not academic format), which sat uncomfortably with the anti-scholastic spirit of 15th-century monastic reform, and seemed not in keeping with the Gersonian call to simplicity which had inspired their interest in mystical theology. It was after all their zeal for reform which had motivated the Tegernseers to consult Cusanus in the first place, not their fascination for obscure and subtle teachings. Given this, it may not have been the Cardinal’s reputation for scholarly erudition which attracted the Tegernseers to him so much as the break with academic theology suggested by the format of his *De docta ignorantia* and *Idiota* treatises—a break which turned out to be less decisive than they would have liked.

Cusanus believed that his approach to mystical theology addressed the problems associated with scholastic theology as practiced in the universities while remaining in harmony with the philosophical and theological traditions, as well as providing a methodology whose practice could be

---

<sup>206</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenberghe (1915), p. 115.

regulated, thereby satisfying the need for reform while obviating concerns about religious orthodoxy, heresy, and the erosion of church authority. However, to some, his defense of the application of philosophy within mystical theology looked like a reactionary defense of those very scholastic vices of which Gerson had been so critical.

In this respect, it is significant that those contemporary writers whose doctrines most closely resemble Cusanus' were his friends, theologian and leading Albertist at Cologne, Heymericus de Campo, and "the last of the schoolmen", Denys the Carthusian. Of those involved in the Tegernsee debate, only the Munich theologian Marquard Sprenger, whose own works on mystical theology also rested on Thomistic foundations, propounded an intellective mystical theology similar to Cusanus'.

In addition, due to his own high station within the Church hierarchy and switch from conciliar to papal support, Cusanus' doctrine was indissociably linked with papal authority—a fact which would not have worked in its favour. Especially to those still sympathetic to the conciliarist cause, his mystical theology was tainted by power and corruption, even if Cusanus himself himself was an ardent reformer. Apart from Vincent's well-documented conciliarist grudge against Cusanus, there were many others resolutely opposed to the Cardinal, who had managed to make himself unpopular with the majority of the cloisters in his new diocese almost from the moment of his arrival. As such, his friendly relationship with Tegernsee was actually an exception—and even here his reform measures were frowned upon.

Cusanus' heavy-handed application of papal authority must have resounded in the pages of his letters and treatises on mystical theology, casting a pall over teachings whose contents already bore a faint odor of scholastic theology. Vincent may have been the only one in the debate to make these connections explicit (i.e., conciliarism = reform = affective mystical theology; papalism = corruption = scholastic theology), but he was only expressing the popular sentiment. Too radical for the schools, too conservative for the cloisters, in his mystical theology as in his other works, Cusa seemed to be swimming against the tide of his time.

#### CONCLUSION TO PART I: CUSANUS' DEBATES WITH WENCK AND AGGSBACH AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FIFTEENTH-CENTURY THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

It is ironic that the two major debates which took place over Cusanus' approach to mystical theology during his lifetime involved diametrically

opposing criticisms: Johannes Wenck was vitriollically opposed to what he viewed as the total abandonment of reason and thus destruction of theological science as practiced in the universities, whereas Vincent of Aggsbach was with equal vehemence opposed to an approach that was in his view excessively rational and 'academic'. Both men looked at the same doctrine and saw opposite things. What they share in common is, however, equally interesting: for both were staunch lifelong supporters of conciliarism who intensely resented Cusanus' switch to the papal cause. And indeed, political motives stand so strongly in the background of the debates in both cases that they almost overshadow the putative theological grounds of their attacks.

However this does not mean that genuine theological–philosophical issues were not under discussion, or were merely the pretext for attacks motivated solely by old grudges. Rather it reflects the fact that in the late fifteenth century, deep-seated church-political concerns were inextricably woven into theological concerns. Wenck and Vincent's underlying resentment of Cusanus for fighting conciliarism does not diminish the sincerity or legitimacy of their theological criticisms, for as we have seen, both believed that only the ecclesiastical reform which they believed only conciliarism could provide would enable the practice of the type of theology they respectively considered to be necessary for the defense and ongoing health of the Faith. What was being debated, for example, with respect to the "detached life", was nothing less than the preservation of ecclesiastical authority. That these debates took place on the eve of the Reformation furthermore shows that serious things were in the balance.

In this connection, Cusanus' attempt to strike a balance between the theological extremes represented by Wenck and Aggsbach appears all the more significant, from both a theological and political perspective. Just as he strove to convince his peers that the conciliarist ideal of ecclesiastical reform could thrive within the context of papal authority, so he sought to show that the reform of academic theology was best realized, not through an anti-intellectual turn to sentiment or fideism, but through the return to what he felt was a truer and more genuine sense of intellectualism, which, he believed, was fully in harmony with the Faith. In this way, we see that Cusanus' forward-thinking ideals were always tempered by a cautious desire to preserve the institutions of the past.



PART TWO

BEYOND THE DEBATES: FAITH AND REASON AS MIRRORED  
IN CUSANUS' PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY



### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE IDIOT: THE ROLE OF ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY OF CUSANUS

As we have already seen, one of the key factors in the debates between Cusanus and Wenck/Aggsbach concerned the application and interpretation of the Aristotelian philosophy. As such, our examination of faith and reason in Cusanus would not be complete without a deeper investigation of his own relation to and appropriation of the Aristotelian philosophy.

#### PREVIOUS VIEWS OF CUSANUS' RELATIONSHIP TO ARISTOTLE

Since the early days of contemporary Cusanus research, the influence of neo-Platonism on Cusanus' philosophy has been the focus of much scholarly attention<sup>1</sup> and the contribution of neo-Platonic thinkers like Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Augustine to his thought continues to be a major topic of study.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the issue of Cusanus' engagement with Aristotle has been relatively little addressed and a survey of the secondary literature reveals few studies directly devoted to the topic.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly,

---

<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the work of Raymond Klibansky, who wrote of Cusanus as a transmitter of Platonic texts in the Middle Ages, and drew attention to his use of Proclus' *Platonic Theology* and commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*. (See Klibansky, R. *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition During the Middle Ages*. London: The Warburg Institute, 1939; and Klibansky, R. "Plato's *Parmenides* in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" in *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* Vol. I, No. 2 (1943); subsequently published together as a single volume, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1982.)

<sup>2</sup> On Cusanus and Proclus, see D'Amico, C. "Nikolaus von Kues als Leser von Proklos" in Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag, 2007, 33–64. On the Augustinian influence on Cusan thought, see Kreuzer, J. "Der Geist als imago Dei—Augustinus und Cusanus" in *ibid.*, 65–86; and Cranz, E. "Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Christian Thought" in Izbicki, T., ed. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 73–94. On Cusanus and Pseudo-Dionysius, see Hoye, W. "Die Grenze des Wissens. Nikolaus von Kues in Auseinandersetzung mit der mystischen Theologie des Dionysius Areopagita" in Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. (2007), 87–102; and Cranz, E. "Nicolaus Cusanus and Dionysius Areopagita" and "Cusanus' Use of Pseudo-Dionysius" in Izbicki, ed. (2000), 109–136, 137–150.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the to-date 31 issues of the *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, the main source of Cusanus research, (published by the Cusanus

the extent to which Cusanus has been designated a neo-Platonic thinker is in part responsible for the lack of attention this subject has received in the research.<sup>4</sup>

References to Aristotle in studies of Cusan philosophy tend to be brief and passing, and when longer discussions do occur, it is usually in the course of theoretical expositions of the Cusan doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* which contrast it with the Aristotelian teaching on contradiction and contrariety.<sup>5</sup> When Cusanus' evaluation of Aristotle is mentioned, it is typically characterized as a rejection. For example, in his *Nicolaus Cusanus*, Kurt Flasch speaks of the Philosopher as a point of departure for Cusanus' own "Koinzidenzlehre".<sup>6</sup> Flasch presents an image of the Cusan

---

Institut, Trier), there are only two articles on the theme of Cusanus and the Aristotelian philosophy, namely, Moritz, A. "Aristotelische Physik und Cusanische Koinzidenz. Mittelalterliche Rezeptionen der aristotelischen Unendlichkeitsdiskussion als Vorgeschichte der cusanischen Koinzidenzlehre" in *MFCC* 29. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 161–182; and Gandillac, M. "Die aristotelische erste Philosophie nach « De venatione sapientiae »" in *MFCC* 6. Trier: Paulinus, 1967, 30–34. The latter is not really an essay, however, and is rather more the record of a discussion between Gandillac and other participants in a symposium on the topic of Cusanus' interpretation of Aristotle in *De venatione sapientiae* in relation to certain modern interpretations of Aristotle; and the former, as the title manifests, concerns the medieval Aristotelian tradition regarding Aristotle's teaching on the nature of the infinite in the *Physics*, and how this may have influenced Cusanus.

<sup>4</sup> That this is indeed a typical overall characterization of his thought is evinced by a survey of lexica articles on Cusanus. For example he is identified as a "medieval Platonist" by the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, whose article goes on to say: "Nicholas of Cusa revitalized Neoplatonism as the most effective answer to the needs of his time. His thought was firmly rooted in the philosophy of Proclus and Christian medieval Neoplatonism and was opposed to the Aristotelianism that had prevailed in Western Europe since the 13th century" (Article: "Nicholas of Cusa" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edwards, P., ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967, 496–498). Similar characterizations are found in the German lexica: "Nikolaus steht in der Tradition des Platonismus, wie er durch Proklos entfaltet und von Pseudo-Dionysios Areopagites ins Christliche übergeleitet wurde [...]" (Article: "Nikolaus von Kues" in *Großes Werklexikon der Philosophie*. Band 2. Volpi, F., ed. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2004, 1090–1099).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Klaus Jacobi contrasts the Cusan with the Aristotelian teaching on contradiction and contraries in his book *Die Methode der Cusanischen Philosophie*. München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1969, pp. 280–290. Kurt Flasch does the same in his *Nicolaus Cusanus* (München: C.H. Beck, 2001), p. 113. Cf. also Stammkötter, F. "Hic homo parum curat de dictis Aristotelis". Der Streit zwischen Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg und Nikolaus von Kues um die Gültigkeit des Satzes vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch" in *MM* 31. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 433–444. Aristotle's teaching on the nature of contradiction is found primarily in *Metaphysics*, Book IV, 1011b 13–1012a 29 and *Categories* X; and on contrariety in *Metaphysics* X, 1054b 32–1055a 83.

<sup>6</sup> Which in Flasch's words "verwirft die aristotelisch-traditionelle Lehre, das Auftreten von widersprechenden Sätzen bezüglich desselben Subjekts beweise die Unwahrheit mindestens eines derselben". Flasch (2001), p. 113. Kurt Flasch devotes some space to the topic in his *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998) and in the above-mentioned *Nicolaus Cusanus* (2001). However in the former

philosophy as beginning where the Aristotelian philosophy ends, as of succeeding where the latter failed, and refers to Aristotle as “aporetic”, from the Cusan perspective.<sup>7</sup> While true to a certain extent, this conception does not present the whole picture; for, as we will see, rather than seeking to replace or to work outside of the principles fundamental to the Aristotelian philosophy, Cusanus intended his own doctrine of learned ignorance to serve as the completion or fulfilment of this philosophy.

There has however been some recognition in the research of the positive appropriation and even necessary role of the Aristotelian philosophy in Cusanus’ doctrine of learned ignorance. Martin Thurner, for example, has recognized how Cusanus “modifies” Aristotelian notions to fit within his own framework, and refers to the Cusan method of “Erkenntnisregress” whereby one reasons backwards from effects to their necessary cause, as a modification of the Aristotelian notion of philosophy as the search for first causes (re. *Met.* 981–982).<sup>8</sup> In addition, Ullrich Offermann has recognized that Cusanus did not reject Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction with his doctrine of the coincidence of opposites, but rather that he wished to show how the latter doctrine is the necessary ultimate conclusion of discursive reasoning, and thus that reasoning based on the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction is integral to the process of learned ignorance whereby one attains to a higher level of understanding.<sup>9</sup> The present examination will both affirm and expand upon these conclusions.

---

work he is primarily concerned with Aristotle in the context of 15th-century Italian debates over the relative merits of the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, and has relatively little to say about Cusanus’ actual engagement with or use of the Aristotelian philosophy in the texts themselves (Flasch [1998], pp. 225–231).

<sup>7</sup> “Die Entdeckung des aporetischen Aristoteles”, Flasch [2001], p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> The modification being that this process is conceived by Cusanus as a function of the revelation of divine knowledge to man: “Die Rückführung von Wirkungen auf ihre Ursache wurde bereits von Aristoteles als jene Wesensbestimmung benannt, durch die sich das philosophische Denken ursprünglich von allen anderen menschlichen Erkenntnisarten [...] unterscheidet. Indem Cusanus dem rationalen Begründungsregress eine Funktion im Offenbarungsgeschehen zu-erkennt, kann er zugleich das (aristotelische) Verständnis der Philosophie als theoretischer Wissenschaft der ersten Gründe und Ursachen vertiefend modifizieren”. Thurner (2001), pp. 163–164.

<sup>9</sup> “Nikolaus von Kues will weder die Aristotelische Logik abschaffen oder überwinden noch will er sie als alleingültige Richtschnur über die Angemessenheit allen menschlichen Forschens anerkennen. Die von Aristoteles allem Denken zugrundegelegte Gültigkeit des Nichtwiderspruchsprinzips steht und mit diesem allein nicht zu fassen ist. [...] Die Grundlage allen Forschens ist das Nichtwiderspruchsprinzip. Insofern wird die Aristotelische Logik von Nikolaus von Kues positiv anerkannt. Er verwendet sie auch zu seiner eigenen Beweisführung. Doch, und dies ist die Grenze der Logik, sie gelangt nicht zur Schau. [...] so versucht er, mit der Aristotelischen Logik über diese hinauszugelangen, dorthin, wo es

## REFERENCES TO ARISTOTLE IN CUSANUS

Despite the unquestionable importance of Neoplatonic sources for Cusanus' philosophy, a close look at his works reveals that there are also numerous substantial references to Aristotle. These do not occur evenly throughout his oeuvre, but are rather concentrated in a number of works: The majority are found in the treatises *De docta ignorantia*, *De beryllo*, *De non aliud*, and *De venatione sapientiae*<sup>10</sup> and, while fewer, there are also a number of references to Aristotle in the sermons.<sup>11</sup> It is immediately notable that the latter three of these treatises were composed after 1458, thus belonging to Cusanus' late period,<sup>12</sup> and that the bulk of references in the sermons date from the Brixen era, particularly to those after 1454.<sup>13</sup> As Cusanus had procured new translations of the *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1453, it is not surprising to find an increase of references to Aristotle, not only in his predicative works after 1454, but also in the first treatise he wrote when he returned to composing treatises in 1458—namely, *De beryllo*, in which we find him more heavily engaged with Aristotle than in any of his other works. As such, we may conclude that Cusanus experienced a resurgence of interest in the Philosopher after

---

einen 'Widerspruch ohne Widerspruch', einen 'Gegensatz ohne Gegensatz' gibt". Offerman (1991), pp. 64–65.

<sup>10</sup> Esp. in Bk. II, ch. VI–IX of *De docta ignorantia*, ch. 24–30 of *De beryllo*, ch. 18–20 of *De non aliud*, and ch. 8–9 of *De venatione sapientiae*, all of which will be discussed below. It is also of note that this list of treatises overlaps largely with one compiled by Mark Führer in a recent essay in which he enumerated all occurrences of the term 'Platonici' in Cusanus' treatises, reflecting the fact that Cusanus' references to Aristotle tend to occur in discussions which include references to other ancient philosophers as well, and thus, to address the ancient tradition as a whole. Führer's list includes *De docta ignorantia*, *De genesi*, *Idiota de mente*, *De beryllo*, *De principio*, *De venatione sapientiae*, and *De ludo globi*. Führer, M. "Cusanus Platonicus. References to the Term 'Platonici' in Nicholas of Cusa" in Gerst, S. and Hoenen, M., eds. *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages. A Doxographic Approach*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002, 345–370, pp. 358–362.

<sup>11</sup> Esp. in Sermons 165, 168, 189, 251, 258 and 288, which will be discussed in the following section.

<sup>12</sup> *De docta ignorantia* was written in 1440, *De beryllo* in 1458, *De non aliud* in 1462, and *De venatione sapientiae* in 1463.

<sup>13</sup> There are 16 references to Aristotle in sermons 126–288, of his Brixen period (Sermon 148, 152, 165, 189, 197, 198, 217, 251, 258, 259, 263, 288). Cusanus was in residence as bishop of Brixen from 1452–1458. One hundred and sixty-two sermons survive from this period. Between 1454 and 1458 he produced no treatises at all, but only sermons. For information on Cusanus' Brixen bishopric, see Watanabe, M. "Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolean Monasteries: Reform and Resistance" in Watanabe, M. *Concord and Reform*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 133–153; and Hallauer, H. "Nikolaus von Kues als Rechtshistoriker. Sein Kampf um die Bewahrung der Brixener Kirche" in *MFCG* 24. Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1998, 103–170.

1453, which continued up to the very end of his life, as manifested by the number of references in *De non aliud* (1462) and *De venatione sapientiae* (1463).<sup>14</sup>

That Cusanus was well-acquainted with the works of Aristotle is also evident from the many manuscripts he possessed in his library.<sup>15</sup> These texts are in most cases complete, and in some cases he owned multiple copies in different translations. In particular the *Ethics* and *Metaphysics* seem to have drawn his special attention, as in addition to the recent acquisitions mentioned above, he possessed two other versions of each work.<sup>16</sup> That he furthermore not only owned, but closely examined these works is evinced by the presence of numerous marginal notations in the Cardinal's own hand. Particularly in his Bessarion translation of the *Metaphysics*, Cusanus carefully corrected the text from beginning to end, inserting comments

<sup>14</sup> Flasch also confirms that the years after 1453 mark an increased engagement with Aristotle. Flasch (1998), p. 572.

<sup>15</sup> During his lifetime he possessed manuscripts of Aristotle's *Rhetorica* (Cod. Cus. 180), *De anima* (Cod. Cus. 183), *Parva naturalia* (Cod. Cus. 187), *De animalibus* (Cod. Cus. 182), *De coelo et mundo* (Cod. Cus. 183), *De generatione et corruptione* (Cod. Cus. 183), *Politica* (Cod. Cus. 179), *Oeconomica* (Cod. Cus. 179), *Ethica* (Cod. Cus. 179, 181, 182), and *Metaphysica* (Cod. Cus. 182, 183, 184); see Marx, J. *Verzeichnis der Handschriften-Sammlung des Hospitals zu Cues bei Bernkastel a./Mosel*. Trier: Selbstverlag des Hospitals, 1905, pp. 167–172. Notably absent from this list are Aristotle's logical works, or *Organon*. There is indeed a manuscript (Cod. Cus. 188) containing *quaestiones* on the individual works of the *Organon*, however each of them is inscribed with the date of 1485 or 1486, and so cannot be counted among Cusanus' personal collection (*ibid.*, pp. 175–76). In addition to these sources, Cusanus had in his possession a number of scholastic commentaries on the works of Aristotle, including Aegidius Romanus' commentary on the *Physica* (Cod. Cus. 189), Albertus Magnus' commentaries on the *Parva naturalia* and *De anima* (Cod. Cus. 193; Marx [1905], pp. 179–80). He also possessed a collection of *quaestiones* on the *Parva naturalia* (Cod. Cus. 187; Marx [1905], pp. 173–74), and another primarily on the *De anima* and *Physica* (Cod. Cus. 192; Marx [1905], pp. 178–79). He also had Aristotle commentaries from the Latin Arabic tradition, including a manuscript containing Avicenna's commentaries on the *De animalibus*, *De anima* and *Metaphysica* (Cod. Cus. 205, f. 1–39, f. 49–80v, f. 99–120v; Marx [1905], pp. 190–91). And he possessed a copy of the *Auctoritates Aristotelis* (Cod. Cus. 308, f. 88v–102v; Marx [1905], pp. 299–300), and the *Vita Aristotelis* of Leonardo Aretini (Cod. Cus. 179, f. 175–181v; Marx [1905], p. 168). For the critical edition of the *Auctoritates Aristotelis*, see Hamesse, J., ed. *Les auctoritates Aristotelis : un florilège médiéval, étude historique et édition critique*. Louvain: Publ. Univers., 1974.

<sup>16</sup> Cusanus possessed three copies of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: one of which was translated by Leonardo Bruni and copied by his secretary Peter von Erklentz (Cod. Cus. 179; dated 1453, Brixen; Marx [1905], pp. 167–70). The other two are 14th-century copies of Grosseteste's translation (Cod. Cus. 181 and Cod. Cus. 182, 64–115; Marx [1905], pp. 169–170). He also possessed three copies of the *Metaphysics*, most notably the translation made by Bessarion which Cusanus obtained in 1453 (Cod. Cus. 184; Marx [1905], p. 172). This manuscript contains numerous marginal notations in Cusanus' hand. The other two are copies dating from the 14th century (Cod. Cus. 182, 1–62v and Cod. Cus. 183, f. 1–46; Marx [1905], pp. 170–71).



of his own. His notations are especially dense in Books VII to IX, which contain the Aristotelian discussion of the nature of substance.

### *References to Aristotle in the Sermons*

References in the early sermons to ancient philosophy are largely derived from various works of Augustine or sources such as Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*,<sup>17</sup> and often concern prefigurations of the Trinity. For example, in Sermon 19 (1438), Cusanus cites Augustine's remark that the Platonists confirm much of what is in the Gospel.<sup>18</sup> The earliest explicit reference to Aristotle is in Sermon 10 (1431), the topic of which is blessedness and moral purification, and refers to the Philosopher's statement that gentleness is in men by nature just as cruelty is by nature in the lion.<sup>19</sup> The proximate source of this reference is however unclear, and the reference is made in passing and not associated with a philosophical discussion.<sup>20</sup> Given that Book II of *De docta ignorantia* contains considerable discussion of Aristotle, we might have expected to find some reference to him in Sermon 22 (1440), which, as we saw, contains many elements from this treatise.<sup>21</sup> However, this is not the case, and in fact we find references of

<sup>17</sup> A copy of which Cusanus possessed in the translation of George of Trebizond: Cod. Cus. 41; Marx [1905], pp. 35–36.

<sup>18</sup> h *Sermo* 19, 6, 1–4: «Item, quo modo Platonici etiam magnam partem huius evangelii posuerunt, ut Augustinus dicit X De civitate 7 et VIII Confessionum.» Cf. also Sermons 1, 2, and 23.

<sup>19</sup> h *Sermo* 10, 9, 27–28: «Mansuetudo inest hominibus a natura secundum Philosophum et crudelitas leoni.»

<sup>20</sup> The Heidelberg editors insert a reference here to Seneca's *De ira*. However, while Cusanus refers explicitly to Seneca in the context of a discussion of anger in other parts of the sermon, the reference provided (*De ira*, I c.5 n.2 33–34) bears no clear resemblance to this statement, and in fact contradicts the principle here asserted. For while Cusanus' remark identifies cruelty with bestiality, Seneca clearly states that both cruelty and gentleness are exclusively human traits, of which no animal is capable (citing this as a point of disagreement with Aristotle). Seneca. *De ira*, I. III. 3–8. Two helpful references for the source of this remark are provided in Jasper Hopkin's translation of Sermon 10, both referring to Aristotle himself: the first to *Historia animalium* VIII. 5 (594b 17ff.), and the second to *Topica* V. 2 (130a 26–27). The first speaks of the savage nature of the lion, and the second defines man as an animal civilized by nature. Taken together, they provide a plausible source for Cusanus' statement; although so far as we know neither the *Topica* nor the *Historia animalium* belonged to his library collection. (See *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430–1441*. Hopkins, J., trans. Loveland, Colorado: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2003, p. 243, n. 20.)

<sup>21</sup> For example, the following passage referring to God as existing beyond all opposition: «Iam vides, si subtilissimo intellectu te elevaveris, quo modo non intellegitur Deus, quia omnem oppositionem supergreditur per infinitum; quo modo ipsa entitas, quae est

no number or significance until we reach the sermons composed during his Brixen bishopric (1452–1458).<sup>22</sup>

In total, there are twenty-four references to ancient philosophers in the Brixen sermons,<sup>23</sup> of which sixteen are to Aristotle. Not all of these evince an extensive analysis of the works of Aristotle, as some are very commonplace. For example, citations such as that “all men by nature desire to know” (*Metaphysics*, I, 1),<sup>24</sup> are of the sort that any learned person would have known by heart, and others such as “Just as it is with bats’ eyes in respect of daylight, so is it with our mental intelligence in respect of those things which are by nature most obvious”<sup>25</sup> (*Metaphysics* II, 1)<sup>26</sup>—likely derive from compendia in Cusanus’ possession like the *Auctoritates Aristotelis*.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, what Cusanus does with them is still significant, as even these cases show Cusanus actively seeking to incorporate the Aristotelian philosophy into his own thought in fundamental ways.<sup>28</sup>

---

infinita essendi forma, est principium omnium quae sunt, medium et finis.» (h *Sermo* XXII, 14 1–6)

<sup>22</sup> It should be pointed out, that as the Heidelberg edition of the sermons dating from Cusanus’ legation period (1551–52) were still at press at the time of my research, I was unfortunately not able to include them in this study.

<sup>23</sup> Sermons 126–288: 16 references to Aristotle (in Sermons 148, 152, 165, 168, 189, 197, 198, 217, 251, 258, 263, 288), 3 to Plato (246, 262, 279), 2 to Socrates (217, 246), 1 to ‘Platonici’ (250), 1 to Pythagorus (262), 1 to Epicureans (250).

<sup>24</sup> h *Sermo* 217, 3, 18–20: «Unde recte dicebat Aristoteles, quod omnes homines naturaliter scire desiderant» (re. *Metaphysics* I, 1).

<sup>25</sup> h *Sermo* 148, 8, 25–28: «Et Aristoteles dicit: «Sicut oculus nocticoracis non potest videre solem, sic nec nos lumen creatoris, scilicet Deum, et substantias separatas.» »

<sup>26</sup> All English translations from the *Metaphysics* here refer to the Loeb Classical Library edition, Tredennick, H., trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961–2.

<sup>27</sup> The Heidelberg editors give the *Summa contra gentiles* (III c. 45) of Thomas as the proximate source of the above citation from *Metaphysics* II, 1 (h *Sermo* 148, p. 126, n. 26–28); however the wording used is much closer to that found in the *Auctoritates Aristotelis* (Hamesse [1974], p. 118): «Sicut se habet oculus nocticoracis ad lumen solis vel diei, sic se habet noster intellectus ad manifestissima naturae, ad deum, et ad substantias separatas, et ad naturas rerum subtilium». In particular, Cusanus employs the word ‘nocticoracus’, which is also used in the *Auctoritates*, whereas in the *Summa*, Thomas uses ‘vespertilionus’. ‘Nicticoracus’ (my italics) is used in both the Moerbeke and ‘Media’ *Metaphysics* translations (see *Aristoteles Latinus* XXV 2 and 3.2), and ‘vespertilionus’ in the Bessarion translation. Thus the *Auctoritates* seem to be the likely source in this case.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Thurner notably attaches considerable significance even to Cusanus’ use of the Aristotelian citation that all men desire by nature to know (as it occurs in Sermon 187), insofar as Cusan thought, according to Thurner, is centred around the attempt to show that man’s natural striving for knowledge is a manifestation of the fact that his very understanding was created in him as a gift of God: “Cusanus erreicht hier eine tiefere Begründung des Offenbarungsgeschehens, indem er die von Aristoteles geprägte philosophische Bestimmung des Menschen als desjenigen Wesens, das von Natur aus nach Wissen strebt, aus ihrer Bedeutung innerhalb des religiösen Glaubensvollzuges versteht. [...] Das aristotelische ‘Streben’ (ορεγονται) wird bei Cusanus mit ‘Sehnen’ (*desiderant*) wiedergegeben

*References in the Sermons to the Ethics*

Some of the less general references to Aristotle in these sermons refer to passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*—all of which are made in regard to the theme of *felicitas*, or happiness. This theme is not one that occurs often in the treatises, but is a common feature of the latter parts of Cusanus' sermons, which he often reserves for discussion of themes related to mystical theology, including contemplation as a process of deification, and sometimes as the *felicitas iucundissima*. For example, at the very end of Sermon 189 (1455), Aristotle is discussed in connection with the subject of the perfection of contemplation as the most joyous happiness (*felicitas iucundissima*). Here Cusanus writes that the philosophers were in error insofar as they failed to see that happiness is a gift of grace.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless Cusanus goes on to acknowledge the extent to which Aristotle's account of happiness in Book X of the *Ethics* is compatible with the notion of grace. For the Philosopher recognized that happiness is not a human thing, but rather something divine in the mind:

Nevertheless one could see that Aristotle touched upon something [like this], in the tenth book of the *Ethics*, where he asserted the happy life to be better than the human, saying: "For it is not insofar as he is a man, that he would so live, but by virtue of something divine that exists in him. [...]".<sup>30</sup>

And he furthermore asserted that the most divine activity of the mind, which is the happy life, is nothing other than contemplation.<sup>31</sup>

Thus far may the Philosopher's account of *felicitas* therefore be affirmed. However, Aristotle erred, according to Cusanus, in that he failed to see how the divine in man is there only by virtue of Divinity itself, which is to the mind in contemplation as the faculty of vision is to light:

---

und so als Moment im religiösen Grundakt des Verlangens nach der im Glauben geschenkten erfahrungshaften Gottesbegegnung begriffen" (Thurner [2001], pp. 32–33).

<sup>29</sup> h *Sermo* 189 21, 1–4: «Unde cum felicitas non sit nisi gratia addita naturae, quae quidem fuit ignorata et per Jesum et suos apostolos evangelizata, tunc constat philosophos in felicitate defecisse.»

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 21, 4–9: «Posset tamen alicui videri quod Aristoteles aliquid tetigerit in decimo Ethicorum, ubi aiebat felicem vitam potiore esse quam humanam, dicens: «Non enim qua homo est, ita vivet, sed qua divinum quoddam in ipso exsistit. [...]»» (*Nic. Eth.* X,vii). The length and detail of the discussion of Aristotle in Sermon 189 suggest close acquaintance with the source text. The Heidelberg editors also refer this passage to the copy of the *Ethics* in Cod. Cus. 181 (h *Sermo* 189, p. 369, n. 21 8–14; Cod. Cus. 181; Marx [1905], pp. 169–170).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 21 15–17: «Et ibi Aristoteles videtur velle quod operatio secundum mentem sit felicitas iucundissima, quae est contemplatio, in qua Deo assimilamur.»

However he understood our mind to be divine in respect to our other parts, and to have the property and natural operation that is to speculate, and that in its natural operation, namely its most joyous speculation, it attains ultimate happiness. In this he erred. For just as it is delightful to see light with the sensible eye, nevertheless this can only be seen by virtue of the emission of its rays into a strong and capable visual faculty, by means of which it is seen. And so is the Absolute truth, which is infinite light, not visible without the light of his glory. Thus since happiness is perfect and everything which belongs to happiness is perfect, as Aristotle himself admits, so is there no happiness without the perfected contemplation of truth. However that light is only perfectly seen through its own light. But this light of glory is given by grace to the mind, which is its capacity.<sup>32</sup>

Absolute truth, which as infinite and transcendent is only ours as a gift of grace, is therefore the *capacity* by virtue of which our minds are able to engage in contemplation, and thereby achieve the *felicitas iucundissima*. Cusanus later makes the same point much more succinctly in Sermon 251 (1456):

For speculation or contemplation or vision is the most perfect act felicitating our supreme, namely, intellectual nature, as even Aristotle showed. But Aristotle himself does not speak of the glory of the Lord, which we understand here to be Christ, who is in the glory of God the Father.<sup>33</sup>

This account of grace is moreover consistent with discussions we saw in *De docta ignorantia* and elsewhere: while on the one hand it is sharply distinguished from that of the pagan philosopher, in that it identifies the ultimate source of the mind's capacity as a gift from a transcendent source, nevertheless, as a *capacity*, this gift is always present in the mind and thus is immanent with respect to human nature. Thus, while praise is carefully balanced with criticism of the heathen philosopher, what is most striking

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 21 28–45: «Intelligit autem mentem nostram esse divinum in respectu ad alia nostra et habere propriam et naturalem operationem, quae est speculari, ac quod in naturali opere suo, scilicet iucundissima speculatione sua, ultimam felicitatem assequatur. In hoc errat. Sicut enim delectabile est lumen videre oculo sensibili, non potest tamen videri nisi per immissionem radii sui in visum fortem et capacem mediante quo videtur, sic nec veritas absoluta, quae est lux infinita, est speculabilis sine lumine gloriae suae. Unde cum felicitas sit perfecta et omnia quae felicitatis sunt perfecta sint, ut ipsemet Aristoteles ibidem fatetur, tunc sine perfecta contemplatione veritatis non est felicitas. Perfecte autem lux illa non videbitur nisi lumine suo. Hoc autem lumen gloriae de gratia datur menti eius capaci.»

<sup>33</sup> h *Sermo* 251, 2 3–9: «Nam speculatio seu contemplatio seu visio est actus perfectissimus felicitans naturam supremam nostram, scilicet intellectualem, prout etiam Aristoteles ostendit. Sed non dicit ipse Aristoteles de gloria domini, quam nos Christi hoc loco intelligimus, qui est in gloria Dei Patris» (re. *Eth. Nic.* X, vii).

here is how close Cusanus' account comes to Aristotle's, and the extent to which Nicolaus is able to assimilate and incorporate his definition of the greatest happiness as the perfected contemplation of truth into his own highly intellectual mystical theology.

*References in the Sermons to the Metaphysics*

In addition to those based on the *Ethics*, there are also a number of references in the Brixen sermons to the *Metaphysics*. We find one in Sermon 165 (1454), where the Philosopher is said to have erred regarding many things, particularly in the *Metaphysics*, where he asserted that nothing corruptible can become incorruptible:

Therefore Aristotle erred in many things, and they are inscribed in the 11th book of the *Metaphysics*, where it is attempted to prove that the corruptible can never transform into the incorruptible, because they differ in genus and as a consequence in essential principles.<sup>34</sup>

Here the motive for the criticism is clearly theological, as the Philosopher's statement precludes the possibility of the Incarnation. If he had seen, however, how the one Word is the origin both of everything that is temporal and everything that is eternal, he would have spoken otherwise.<sup>35</sup> It is furthermore interesting that Cusanus then proceeds to defend his *theological* objection to Aristotle with examples from natural philosophy of materials, such as metals and herbs, which 'transition' from a 'corruptible' to an 'incorruptible' state, showing his desire to ground theological truths—even in his sermons—as far as possible in scientifically verifiable explanations.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> h *Sermo* 165, 8, 5–10: « Propterea Aristoteles in multis erravit et signanter in XI Metaphysicae ubi probare nititur corruptibile numquam transire in incorruptibile quia genere differunt et per consequens in principiis essentialibus. » Although he indicates *Metaphysics* XI, the passage most relevant for this particular point is found at the very end of Book X. (*Metaphysics* X, 10 [1058b 26–1059a 16–29]): “Since contraries are other in form, and the perishable and the imperishable are contraries (for privation is a determinate incapacity), the perishable and the imperishable must be different in kind.”

<sup>35</sup> h *Sermo* 165, 8 10–13: « Si vidisset quo modo ex uno verbo omnia quod est principium visibilium omnium quae sunt temporalia, et invisibilium omnium quae aeterna, non dixisset. »

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 8 18–25: « Multa exempla transitus corruptibilis in incorruptionem habemus: metalla habent eadem principia et transeunt de maiori corruptione in minorem per digestionem longiorem usque in ultimam perfectionem quae est auri. Sic in cineres resolvitur herba, et ex illis vi ignis vitrum solidum et clarum atque vix umquam amplius in cineres resolubile excitatur. »

This reference may furthermore be tied directly not only to the *Metaphysics* as source text, but specifically to Cusanus' own translation by Bessarion, where next to the respective passage Cusanus inserted the following marginal notation:

He says that the corruptible differs from the incorruptible in genus. The apostle Paul says that the corruptible assumes incorruptibility. And it is not one thing that differs in genus, this man from that, the corruptible namely from the incorruptible.<sup>37</sup>

Thus we see that Cusanus not only possessed, but made active use of his Bessarion translation of the *Metaphysics*, even in his sermons, and shortly after having received it (in 1453).

We find another reference to the *Metaphysics* in Sermon 168 (1455), in the context of a discussion of Christ as the perfection of peace (*pax perfecta*), in whom coincide the tri-causal unity of the origin as efficient, formal, and final cause.<sup>38</sup> Cusanus points out that this tri-causal nature of the most simple divine origin was recognized even by the gentile Aristotle, who saw that without it there would be nothing.<sup>39</sup> And in an interesting passage from Sermon 258 (1458), Cusanus ties Aristotle's assertion at the end of *Metaphysics* XII that the ultimate principle of reality must be one,<sup>40</sup> to the notion of Christ as the mental Word, or principle of the intellect, by likening the final conclusion of the twelve books of the *Metaphysics* to the *Verbum abbreviatum*:

Thus it would be that Aristotle wanted to manifest the one conclusion which he had in mind: for example, that the origin is one; which is the conclusion of the *Metaphysics*. He speaks this conclusion implicitly in multifarious and many ways, through many premises, which are in the various books, tractates and chapters of the books; however he explains that conclusion which he intended only at the end, namely, in the twelfth book. This ultimate abridged word (*verbum abbreviatum*) is the conclusion, having in itself all things which were said before or can be said after, in which the mind of Aristotle himself is indeed contained, purely, and clearly with every

---

<sup>37</sup> Cod Cus. 184, 68r: « Dicit corruptibile ab incorruptibili genere differe. Paulus apostolus dicit corruptibile induere incorruptibilitatem. Et non est unum, quod genere differat, homo ille ab isto, corruptibilis scilicet ab incorruptibili. »

<sup>38</sup> h *Sermo* 168, 3 1–10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4 3–6: « Et hic est Deus, quem etiam gentilis Aristoteles tricausalem atque cum hoc unam simplicissimam vidit causam, sine qua nihil subsistere potest. »

<sup>40</sup> *Metaphysics* XII, 10 (1076a 3–4).

plenitude of perfection. And he who receives this abridged word receives the mind of Aristotle in his intellect and is made an Aristotelian.<sup>41</sup>

The term *Verbum abbreviatum*, or abridged Word, in medieval theology denoted the concept of Christ as embodying, in the one Word, the whole of what is contained in Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Here Cusanus uses the assertion that the conclusion of *Metaphysics* 12 is also the implicit premise and principle of the entire work, in order to set up a comparison of this text with the Holy Scripture.

The comparison operates on a structural level in the sense that the many words in both books are considered to be the unfolding of a single, enfolding word or principle. But there is also a further dimension to it: Cusanus chose Aristotle's *Metaphysics* for this comparison because, in his view, its enfolding principle « unus est princeps », is analogous to the one Word which is the principle of Scripture. And just as someone reading the written Word in Scripture receives the mental Word in their mind, so too, according to Cusanus, does one reading the *Metaphysics* receive nothing less than the mind of Aristotle, "in every plenitude of perfection" in his intellect, which is transformed by it. By extension, because the principle of this teaching (« unus est princeps ») is the same as that of the Word, one receives also the kernel of the Faith. In short, there is in Aristotle a spark of the same divinity which is the *Verbum Dei*. Thus, for Cusanus, the Aristotelian philosophy itself, when carefully considered, manifests the universality of the Faith. This reference may also be linked to Cusanus'

---

<sup>41</sup> h *Sermo* 258, 3 1–20: « Sit igitur quod Aristoteles velit unam conclusionem, quam menti habet, manifestare: puta unum esse principem; quae est conclusio Metaphysicae. «Multifarie multisque modis» ipse per multas praemissas, quas in diversis libris, tractatibus librorum et capitulis illam conclusionem loquitur implicate, novissime vero explicat illam, quam intendebat conclusionem in fine, scilicet duodecimi libri. Hoc ultimum verbum abbreviatum est conclusio in se habens omnia, quae aut praecedenter dicta sunt aut post dici possunt, in quo mens ipsius Aristotelis continetur vere, pure, aperte cum omni plenitudine perfectionis. Et qui recipit hoc verbum abbreviatum, recipit mentem Aristotelis in suum intellectum et efficitur Aristotelicus. »

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Jost, W., and Olmsted, W., eds. *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 73: "Patristic and medieval faith in the sufficiency of Christ was formulated also in the theory of the *verbum abbreviatum*. Frequently occurring in apologetic writings directed against the 'perfidy' of the Jews, it is the argument that Jesus is an abridged word. The many words of the Hebrew authors have yielded to the one Word, Christ, in whom the entire scripture uniquely converges. Theologians appealed to the verse, 'An abbreviated word God spoke upon the earth.'"



Bessarion translation, whose corresponding text passage is highlighted with the marginal notation « princeps unus ».<sup>43</sup>

#### REFERENCES TO ARISTOTLE IN THE TREATISES

There are indeed points in the treatises at which Cusanus is explicitly critical of the Philosopher, which could be mistaken for an outright dismissal of the Aristotelian philosophy. Most notably, certain passages in the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* seem at first glance to advocate such a rejection, based on the incompatibility of the Aristotelian philosophy with mystical theology.<sup>44</sup> However, as we saw above, a closer look at the aforementioned passage reveals that not Aristotle but the *Aristotelica secta* is the real target, and that Cusanus is here reacting to the state of academic learning in his day, which he felt had become bound by rigid adherence to the authority of tradition.<sup>45</sup> It was the close-mindedness of this tradition, and not the philosophy on which it was based, according to Cusanus, which caused schoolmen like Johannes Wenck to regard as heresy the possibility of 'elevating' the intellect above everyday reason to the coincidence of opposites.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, there are many passages in Cusanus' works which show that he held Aristotle in high esteem. Although it is true that Cusanus regarded Plato as the superior philosopher in certain respects, he approves of many of Aristotle's statements, and there are numerous expressions of praise to be found. For example, in *De non aliud*, Cusanus calls him "the exceptional philosopher, who indeed seems to have been gifted with most lucid rationality",<sup>47</sup> and in *De venatione sapientiae*, "first among the Peripatetics, the most acute Aristotle".<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> h *Sermo* 258, note to 3 7–13: "Cf. Aristoteles *Metaph.* XII, 10 (1076a 3–4) (*Cod. Cus.* 184, fol. 84r, lin. 5–6): at entia nolunt male gubernari nec est bonum pluralitas principatum unus ergo princeps, quem locum Nicholas adnotatione instruxit: princeps unus."

<sup>44</sup> h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 6: « Unde, cum nunc Aristotelica secta praeualeat, quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam theologiam, in ea secta nutritis haec via penitus insipida, quasi propositi contraria, ab eis procul pellitur, ut sit miraculo simile—sicuti sectae mutatio—reieto Aristotele eos altius transilire. »

<sup>45</sup> See above section "Idiota de mente".

<sup>46</sup> h *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> h *De non aliud*, ch. 19, 36ff, pp. 45–46: « [...] eximiam [...] philosophum [...], qui quidem ratione lucidissima dotatus videtur fuisse. »

<sup>48</sup> h *De venatione sapientiae*, ch. VIII, 19 10: « [...] Peripateticorum princeps, acutissimus Aristoteles [...] »

There are furthermore a number of passages which show that Cusanus considered Aristotle a great authority in the realms of ethics and politics, and that it was only in his metaphysics that he erred. In *De non aliud* he writes: "Indeed, even if this philosopher failed in first philosophy or philosophy of mind, nevertheless he wrote many things in the rational as well as moral philosophy most deserving of all praise";<sup>49</sup> and we find passages in *De beryllo* expressing the same idea—namely, praising his *Politics*, but finding fault with his *Metaphysics*, where he failed to recognize how the maximum and minimum can coincide.<sup>50</sup>

However, despite this assessment that Aristotle 'failed' in his first philosophy, the number of positive references to the *Metaphysics* shows that Cusanus nevertheless considered him to have been correct on many individual points, and his praise of Aristotle's use of reason to discover many theological truths speaks against any general rejection of the usefulness of Aristotelian science for theology.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, there is one case in which Aristotle's opinion is considered superior to Plato's, namely, on the issue of separate species:

---

<sup>49</sup> h *De non aliud*, ch. 19, 10–13, p. 47: «Verum etsi philosophus ille in prima seu mentali philosophia defecerit, multa tamen in rationali ac morali omni laude dignissima conscripsit.»

<sup>50</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 27, 13–18, p. 34: «Aristoteles, quando Politicam conscribere proposuit, ad minimum tam oeconomicae quam politicae se contulit, et in illo minimo, quomodo maximum se habere deberet, vidit dicens sic in aliis similiter faciendum. In Metaphysica autem dicit curvum et rectum in natura contrariari, quare unum non posse converti in aliud. In primo bene dixit [...].» It is furthermore probable that these observations were based on direct reading of the *Politica* itself, since he possessed a copy (Cod. Cus. 179) in which we find marginal notations in his own hand (also noted by the Heidelberg editors [h XI, 1, p. 51, n. 45]).

<sup>51</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 24, 14–17, p. 30: «Aristoteles etiam in sua Metaphysica, quam ipse theologiam appellat, multa conformia veritati ratione ostendit, scilicet principium esse intellectum penitus in actu, qui seipsum intelligit [...].» And also in the same text: «Bene vidit Aristoteles in Metaphysica, quomodo omnia in principio primo sunt ipsum, sed non attendit voluntatem eius non esse aliud a ratione eius et essentia» [re. *Metaphysics* XII 7 1072b 20–31, 9 1074b 15–35] (h *De beryllo*, ch. 23, 5–7, p. 30). While the praise in this case is obviously qualified, the criticism here applies also to Plato, for both were mistaken to think that the Composer-Intellect created everything out of the necessity of nature (cf. *ibid.*, ch. 23, 11–13, 22–24, p. 29: «Aperte enim uterque [Platon et Aristoteles] credidit conditorem intellectum ex necessitate naturae omnia facere, et ex hoc omnis eorum error secutus est»). A similar criticism occurs in Book II, ch. 9 of *De docta ignorantia*: «Philosophi quidem de Verbo divino et maximo absoluto sufficienter instructi non erant; ideo mentem et animam ac necessitatem in quadam explicatione necessitatis absolutae sine contractione considerarunt» (h *De docta ignorantia*, p. 96). Thus in some cases we see that Cusanus' criticism of Aristotle is part of a broader critique that extends to Plato or to all pagan philosophy, such as in the error of placing necessity in God's essence.

But therefore a house, which is in wood or [something] sensible, is not truer in the mind, although its figure is truer there. For it is required for the true being of the house itself, that it be sensible for that end for the sake of which it is: thus it cannot have a separate species, as Aristotle saw well. Thus although figures and numbers and all such intellectual things, which are beings of our reason and lack nature, are truer in their origin, namely, in the human intellect, nevertheless it does not follow from this that all sensible things, whose essence it is that they are sensible, are truer in the intellect than in the senses. Thus Plato seems not to have considered well, when he saw mathematical things, which are abstracted from sensible things, as truer in the mind, and [thought] for this reason that they have another, truer being beyond the intellect.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Aristotle is lauded for recognizing that it is part of the essence of a sensible thing that it *be* sensible, and thus that its essence cannot be something separate from it. Plato failed to see this, causing him to extend the type of being proper to rational entities to sensible ones as well, and ultimately to posit a separate realm of forms.

*Aristotle and the coincidentia oppositorum*

Now, since the crux of the issue of Cusanus' relation to the Aristotelian philosophy hangs on the assertion that Aristotle failed in his first philosophy, this requires closer examination. In Book I, ch. 2 of *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus put forth his doctrine of the coincidence of opposites, explaining that because the absolute maximum is perfect unity, in which there can be no relation or opposition of any kind, therefore all contraries coincide in the divine nature.<sup>53</sup> He also acknowledged that our finite nature entails that human understanding is constrained by contraries,

---

<sup>52</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 22, pp. 41–42: «Sed propterea domus, quae est in lignis aut sensibilis, non est verius in mente, licet figura eius verior sit ibi. Nam ad verum esse ipsius domus requiritur, quod sit sensibilis ob finem, propter quem est: ideo non potest habere speciem separatam, ut bene vidit Aristoteles. Unde licet figurae et numeri et omnia talia intellectualia, quae sunt nostrae rationis entia et carent natura, sint verius in suo principio, scilicet humano intellectu, non tamen sequitur, quod propterea sensibilia omnia, de quorum essentia est, quod sint sensibilia, sint verius in intellectu quam in sensu. Ideo Plato non videtur bene considerasse, quando mathematicalia, quae a sensibilibus abstrahuntur, vidit veriora in mente, quod propterea illa adhuc haberent aliud esse verius supra intellectum.»

<sup>53</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Book I, ch. 2, p. 7: «Maximum autem hoc dico, quo nihil maius esse potest. Habundantia vero uni convenit. Coincidit itaque maximitati unitas, quae est et entitas; quod si ipsa talis unitas ab omni respectu et contractione universaliter est absoluta, nihil sibi opponi manifestum est, cum sit maximitas absoluta. Maximum itaque absolutum unum est, quod est omnia; in quo omnia, quia maximum.»

such as maximum and minimum, true and false, straight and curved, and thus that this coincidence of opposites cannot be conceived of by reason, which “cannot combine contradictories”.<sup>54</sup> Human understanding, he writes, proceeds by way of a *comparativa inquisitio* whereby things are known through their relative difference to other things. “For whatever things are apprehended by the senses, by reason, or by the understanding, differ both within themselves and in relation to one another”. And therefore “maximum equality, which is nothing other than nor different from anything, surpasses all understanding.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite this, Cusanus maintained that a higher level of understanding is attainable beyond the constraints of ordinary reason, in which the coincidence of contradictories can be thought in learned ignorance. And it is this assertion which appears to entail a rejection of the law of non-contradiction, which states that nothing can both be and not be simultaneously and in the same way.<sup>56</sup> Cusanus is specific that the failure of Aristotle’s first philosophy lies in the Philosopher’s unwillingness or inability to see beyond his principle of non-contradiction.<sup>57</sup> This we find expressed first in *De beryllo*, where Cusanus explains that Aristotle asserted the basic principles of substance to be contraries and correctly identified the necessity of a third principle (in addition to matter and

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Book I, ch. 4, pp. 10–11: « Quia [...] maximum absolute est omnia absolute actu, quae esse possunt, taliter absque quacumque oppositione, ut in maximo minimum coincidat, tunc super omnem affirmationem est pariter et negationem. [...] Hoc autem omnem nostrum intellectum transcendit, qui nequit contradictoria in suo principio combinare via rationis, quoniam per ea, quae nobis a natura manifesta fiunt, ambulamus; quae longe ab hac infinita virtute cadens ipsa contradictoria per infinitum distantia connectere simul nequit. Supra omnem igitur rationis discursum incomprehensibiliter absolutam maximam videmus infinitam esse, cui nihil opponitur, cum qua minimum coincidit. »

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Book I, ch. 4, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Metaphysics* 4, III, 9 (1005b 17–22): “It is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation. [...] This is the most certain of all principles [...]; for it is impossible for anyone to suppose that the same thing is and is not [...]” On the Aristotelian first principle, see, e.g., Rapp, C. “Aristoteles über die Rechtfertigung des Satzes vom Widerspruch” in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 47 (1993), 521–541. On the history of this principle in medieval philosophy, cf. Aertsen, J. “Der Satz vom Widerspruch in der mittelalterlichen Philosophie. Baron von Münchhausen, Thomas von Aquin und Nikolaus von Kues” in Jacobi, K., ed. *Argumentationstheorie. Scholastische Forschungen zu den logischen und semantischen Regeln korrekten Folgerns*. Leiden: Brill, 1993, 707–727; Imbach, R. “*Primum Principium*. Anmerkungen zum Wandel in der Auslegung der Bedeutung und Funktion des Satzes vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch bei Thomas von Aquin, Nikolaus von Autrecourt, Heymericus de Campo und Nikolaus von Kues” in Pickavé, M., ed. *Die Logik des Transzendentalen* (MM 30). Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003, 600–616.

<sup>57</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 25–27.

form), which he called “privation”.<sup>58</sup> The problem, according to Cusanus, was that because of his principle of non-contradiction, Aristotle couldn’t recognize the true nature of that third principle, and thus failed to see how what he had been calling “privation” was really a unity underlying the opposition of the contraries:

If Aristotle had understood the principle that he names privation, so that privation were the principle positing the coincidence of contraries, and is thus deprived of contrariety, because it precedes the duality which is necessary in contraries, then he would have seen well. However the fear of admitting that contraries are simultaneously in the same, held him back from the truth of this principle.<sup>59</sup>

In fixing this as the most fundamental and certain of all principles, Aristotle blocked himself from being able to see the higher truth. And because of that failure, according to Cusanus, not only Aristotle, but all philosophers who followed in his footsteps failed to attain to the spirit, “which is the principle of connection and, according to our perfect theology, the third person in the divinity”.<sup>60</sup> But did Cusanus really regard the coincidence of contradictories as destroying the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction, or his doctrine of learned ignorance as anathema to Aristotelian philosophy? As further examination of passages from *De beryllo* and *De non aliud* will show, Cusanus did not regard Aristotle’s first principle as incorrect so much as incomplete.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., ch. 25, p. 31: «Aristoteles concordando omnes philosophos dicebat principia, quae substantiae insunt, contraria. [...] Et tria nominavit principia, materiam, formam, et privationem. Arbitror ipsum, quamvis super omnes diligentissimus atque acutissimus habeatur discursor, atque omnes in uno maxime defecisse. Nam cum principia sint contraria, tertium principium utique necessarium non attigerunt et hoc ideo, quia contraria simul in ipso coincidere non putabant possibile, cum se expellant. Unde ex primo principio, quod negat contradictoria simul esse vera, ipse philosophus ostendit similiter contraria simul esse non posse.»

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 32: «Quod si Aristoteles principium, quod nominat privationem, sic intellexisset, ut scilicet privatio sit principium ponens coincidentiam contrariorum, et ideo privatum contrarietate utriusque tamquam dualitatem, quae in contrariis est necessaria, praecedens, tunc bene vidisset. Timor autem, ne contraria simul eidem inesse fateretur, abstulit sibi veritatem illius principii.»

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.: «Et ob hoc omnes philosophi ad Spiritum, qui est principium connexionis et est tertia persona in divinis secundum nostram perfectam theologiam, non attigerunt [...].»

*On the Subject of Substance*

In Chapter 25 of *De beryllo*, Cusanus writes, “After all these investigations, it seems to me you will ask what according to my estimate is being (*ens*), namely, what is substance”.<sup>61</sup> His remarks in this section are based largely on *Metaphysics* 7, and reflect his close study of the original text—most certainly his Bessarion translation, in which we find a concentration of notations in the margins surrounding Book 7. He then adds the caveat that, although he will try to offer an account of this to the best of his ability, the subject is most profound<sup>62</sup> and paraphrases Aristotle’s remark that the question of being, or substance, is an age-old and baffling one.<sup>63</sup> Aristotle, according to Cusanus, believed the answer to this question to be essential to knowledge itself, since the pinnacle of knowledge is to know what something “was to be” (*quid erat esse*).<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless the philosopher recognized that substance could not have come to be, since it is itself the very possibility of essential being (*possibilitas essendi*).<sup>65</sup> Similarly, neither matter nor form, which comprise substance, can come to be; but both arise in composition.<sup>66</sup> However, Aristotle was ultimately uncertain regarding the what and the whence of substance, as well as the precise nature of its relationship to matter and form. This uncertainty Cusanus assigns to the difficulty of resolving the relation between *potentiality* and *actuality*, either of which seems to presuppose the other.<sup>67</sup> Cusanus does not, in this section on substance, expressly articulate his solution to the above relation which so troubled

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., ch. 28, p. 36: «Videtur mihi utique te post haec quaerere quid ego aestimem ens esse: scilicet quatenus sit substantia.»

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.: «Volo tibi quantum possum satisfacere, quamvis superiora quae dicturus sum contineant.»

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: «Aristoteles scribit: Hanc quaestionem antiquam omnes indagatores veritatis semper quaesierunt huius dubii solutionem et adhuc quaerunt, ut ait.»; re. *Metaphysics* VII, 1 1028b 7: “Indeed, the question which was raised long ago, is still and always will be, and always baffles us—‘What is being?’—is in other words ‘What is substance.’”

<sup>64</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 28, p. 36: «Ipse autem resolvit a solutione illius dubii omnem scientiam dependere. Scire enim “quid erat esse” hoc est: rem ideo hoc esse, puta domum, quia “quod erat esse domui” hoc est, est attigisse altimissimum scibile.»

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> *Metaphysics* 7, 8, 1–6 (1033a 24–1033b 20).

<sup>67</sup> h *De beryllo*, ch. 28, p. 37: «Quid autem sit illa substantia, quam nominat ‘quod erat esse’, dubitat; nescit enim, unde veniat aut ubi subsistat, et an sit ipsum unum aut ens aut genus, vel si sit ab idea, quae sit substantia in se subsistens, aut si educitur de potentia materiae, et si sic, quomodo hoc fiat. Oportet enim, quod omne ens in potentia per ens in actu perducatur in actum. Actus enim nisi prior foret potentia, quomodo potentia veniret in actum?»

Aristotle, but adds that Socrates too had lifelong doubts regarding the issue, and the discussion is certainly in part intended as an example of a problem which all ancients were unable to solve because they lacked the intellectual “*beryllus*”,<sup>68</sup> which would have allowed them to see how potentiality and actuality coincide in the one Origin.

In chapter 18 of *De non aliud*, Aristotle’s reflections on the nature of substance are once again briefly considered. He refers to the same passages, with some additions, and his remarks are based primarily on *Metaphysics* 7. The opinion expressed is also the same, and only the conceptual framework has changed—namely, from that of the intellectual ‘*beryllus*’ to the Origin as ‘*non-aliud*’. ‘*Non aliud*’, or ‘not-other’, is the term Cusanus employs in this treatise to describe the one Origin. He asserts it here as the most accurate definition, or name, for the Origin, which is itself “the origin of all names and things”, since “as far as everything signified is terminated in something other or in the other itself, and since everything other is from the not-other, it certainly does not lead to the Origin.”<sup>69</sup>

Discussing Aristotle’s account of substance within the rubric of the treatise, Cusanus credits Aristotle with realizing that substance could not be anything “other”:

For my part, I consider the way that he asks whether the one and being are not anything other, but the substance of being, [to be] just as [though] he sought the substance of things through the ‘not-other’ itself. [...] And finally it seemed to him that no one had named it well, because whoever had, had named something other or another thing, but they had not named the most simple quiddity of things itself, which he especially saw could not be anything other.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> The ‘*beryllus*’ of the eponymous treatise refers to a type of glass used for lensmaking in medieval times, which Cusanus deploys as a metaphor, or ‘enigma’, for the ‘clarifying’ effect of applying the concept of the coincidence of opposites to various problems. Ibid., ch. 2.

<sup>69</sup> h *De non aliud*, ch. 2, pp. 5–6: «[...] cum sit etiam nominum omnium sicut et rerum principium [...]. Nam omne significatum, quod in aliquid aliud sive in aliud ipsum terminatur, quemadmodum alia omnia sunt ab ipso ‘non aliud’, utique non dirigunt in principium.»

<sup>70</sup> h *De non aliud*, ch. 28, pp. 44–45: «Equidem considero quomodo quaerit, utrum unum et ens non est aliud quidquam, sed entium substantia, qualiter per ipsum ‘non aliud’ rerum substantiarum quaesivit. [...] Et demum illi visum est, quod illam bene nemo nominavit; quia, quicumque eam nominarunt, aliquid aliud sive quid aliud, non ipsam simplicissimam rerum nominarunt quidditatem, quam utique vidit non posse esse aliud aliquid.»



Cusanus' interpretation of Aristotle here is once again heavily overlaid with his own point of view; nevertheless it is significant the extent to which he finds the Philosopher's account consonant with his own, such that he can integrate it with his own terminology. Cusanus clearly views Aristotle and himself as in search of the same goal. The Philosopher realized, according to Cusanus, that what he sought was the very condition of possibility of things, "the light without which he could neither seek nor find the visible";<sup>71</sup> however, because he realized that no manner of rational seeking could attain to that which is the ground of all knowing, he stopped at this point, thinking it not possible to go any further.

Aristotle's essential mistake then, according to this discussion, was his tendency to focus on *otherness* rather than *unity*: for if he had only attended to the fact that substance, as the not-other of things, can therefore *not* be *other* to any thing (and therefore must be *one*), he would have seen that the condition of possibility of all things is simultaneously the end of all things (and is therefore an ultimate unity, or the one Origin).<sup>72</sup> Aristotle thus recognized the goal, but did not know how to reach it. If only he had had the benefit of what Cusanus calls the most "perfect, absolute, and complete" instruction discoverable,<sup>73</sup> namely, the "not-other", he would have perceived the sameness underlying even contradictories, and thus "would have needed to avail himself neither of laborious logic nor the difficult art of definition".<sup>74</sup>

Interesting, then, in this text, is how Cusanus goes beyond simply indicating Aristotle's perplexity regarding substance, and seeks actually to "instruct" him, so to speak, showing how the philosopher *could* have applied Cusanus' conceptual tool of the "*non-aliud*" to resolve his confusion on this subject. Even more interesting is the way Cusanus' demon-

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., ch. 28, p. 45: «[...] lucem [...] sine qua nec posset quarere nec reperire visibile.»

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., ch. 28, p. 45: «[...] qui [Aristoteles] cum mente rerum quidditatem quaereret, lumen, quod per 'non aliud' significatur, illi sese obtulit, tamquam sine quo nequaquam reperiret. Ceterum ipse lumen ipsum 'non aliud' a quaesito non esse aliud ab aliis repperit, quocirca hinc quaerendo remotius nimis adinvenit.»

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., ch. 19, p. 46: «Neque ulla alia reperibilis est perfecta, absoluta et completa traditio.»

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., ch. 19, p. 45: «Neque enim laboriosa logica nec difficili definiendi arte opus habuisset [...]». Flasch rightly relates this reference to 'laborious' and needlessly 'difficult' logic to Cusanus' criticism of scholasticism, or the 'Aristotelian sect', who, inheriting these difficulties, elaborated them into ever more complex and pointless debates: "Cusanus blickt hier zurück auf die spätmittelalterliche Geschichte des Aristotelismus. Sie bestand aus einem Chaos von immer subtiler werdenden Ansichten in der Universalienfrage und in unnützen Debatten der Ideenlehre" (Flasch [1998], p. 574).

stration is conducted: for he does not assert the “*non-aliud*” as an opposing methodology, but rather as an extension of Aristotle’s own process of reasoning: in fact only the same process, led to its properly logical conclusion:

That philosopher believed it most certain that the negative contradicts the affirmative, and that they could not be said simultaneously of the same, inasmuch as they are contradictories. However he said this by way of reason, concluding this as such to be true. But if someone were to have asked of him, what is other, he could have in any case responded truly: “it is not other than other”. And if consequently asking, they had added: Why is the other other?, he would indeed have been able rightly to say, as at first: “because it is not other than other”; and thus he would have seen that not-other and other do not contradict themselves *as contradictories*. And he also would have perceived that that which he named the first principle, does not suffice for showing the way to the truth which is contemplated by the mind beyond reason.<sup>75</sup> (my italics)

And furthermore:

For he [Aristotle] said, there is no substance of substance and no origin of origin [...]; likewise would he also have denied that there is contradiction of contradiction. And if someone then asked him whether in the contradictories he saw contradiction, he would have responded that he truly did see it. Asked thereupon if that which he sees in contradictories he would see anteriorly, just as cause before effect, would he not then see a contradiction without contradiction—this he certainly would not have been able to deny is so. For just as he saw the contradiction in the contradictories to be a contradiction of the contradictories, so before the contradictories he would have seen the contradiction before the named contradiction.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> h *De non aliud*, ch. 19, p. 46: «Philosophus ille certissimum credidit negativae affirmativam contradicere, quodque simul de eodem utpote repugnantia dici non possent. Hoc autem dixit rationis via id ipsum sic verum concludentis. Quodsi quis ab eo quaesivisset, quid est aliud, utique vere respondere potuisset : < non aliud quam aliud est. > Et consequenter si quaerens adiecisset : quare aliud est aliud? Sane quidem, ut prius, dicere valuisset : < quia non aliud quam aliud est > ; et ita ‘non aliud’ et aliud neque sibi ut repugnantia vidisset contradicere. Atque illud, quod primum principium nominat, pro viae ostensione perspexisset non sufficere ad veritatem, quae supra rationem mente contemplatur. »

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., ch. 19, pp. 46–47: «[...] aiebat enim substantiae non esse substantiam nec principii principium [...]; nam sic etiam contradictionis negasset esse contradictionem. At si quisquam eum interrogasset, numquid in contradicentibus contradictionem vidisset, veraciter se videre respondiisset. Deinde interrogatus, si id, quod in contradicentibus vidit, anterioriter sicut causam ante effectum videret, nonne tunc contradictionem videret absque contradictione, hoc certe sic se habere negare nequisset. Sicut enim in contradicentibus contradictionem esse contradicentium contradictionem vidit, ita ante contradicentia contradictionem ante dictam vidisset contradictionem [...]. »

These steps are thus introduced as ones Aristotle would have to concede “by way of reason”, and the conclusion that there is a “contradiction without contradiction” underlying all contraries, is presented as the inevitable conclusion of correct metaphysical reasoning, i.e., one which moves “anteriorly” (*anterioriter*), from effect to cause. While the object of the conclusion, namely, the one Origin, is itself beyond rationality and therefore cannot be *positively* grasped by reason, it is nevertheless a process of rational thought (which respects the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction) which leads one to assert its necessary truth, and to realize that without an Origin in which all opposites coincide, nothing could be what it is.<sup>77</sup>

### *On the Subject of Forms/Universals*

The other most philosophically significant discussion of Aristotelian philosophy is on the subject of forms, or universals. This topic figures prominently in the first half Book II of *De docta ignorantia*, whose overarching theme is the unity of the universe as the enfolded totality of creation. The

---

<sup>77</sup> It should also be noted that in both of these discussions of substance, Cusanus employs the terms *species/quiddity* and *substance* interchangeably, clearly equating them, although to Aristotle they were certainly not the same. In *De non aliud*, Cusanus alternates between the terms ‘*substantia*’ and ‘*quidditas*’ regularly, and in a way that leaves no doubt he intends by them the same thing. For ex.: «[...] sed quidditatem, obiectum intellectus, semper quaesitam, numquam repertam dicit. Sic enim ait in prima philosophia : <omnibus difficillimum est maximamque ambiguitatem habet, utrum unum et ens, ut Pythagorici et Plato dicebat, non est aliud quidquam sed entium substantia [...]» (h *De non aliud*, ch. 18, p. 44); «Esse igitur rerum substantiam praesupposuit et plures tales non esse. Dubitavit autem, sicut alii omnes, quatenam haec esset. Et cum omnibus quaerens concurret, qui ipsam varie nominabant, sciscitans, an per aliquem esset bene nominata. Et demum illi visum est, quod illam bene nemo nominavit; quia, quicumque eam nominarunt, aliquid aliud sive quid aliud, non ipsam simplicissimam rerum nominarunt quidditatem, quam utique vidit non posse esse aliud aliquid» (ibid., ch. 18, pp. 44–45; [my emphasis]); etc.

In *De beryllo* Cusanus is much more attentive to the differences between substance, form and material according to Aristotle, as he limits himself in Chapter 28 to an exposition of what is stated in the *Metaphysics*; however his discussion of species in Chapter 34 clearly equates it with substance: «Sic vides omnem speciem omni speciei aequalem in magnitudine. Quae utique non potest esse quantitas, cum illa recipiat magis et minus, sed est simplex substantialis magnitudo ante omnem quantitatem sensibilem. Quando igitur videtur triangulus in superficie, est videre speciem in subiecto, cuius est species, et ibi video substantiam, quae facta est, quae est hoc ‘quod erat esse’ huius [...]» (h *De beryllo*, ch. 34, p. 45). This interchangeable use of these terms is a consequence of Cusanus’ *anterioriter* method of reasoning which focuses on the unity of the origin: for him—and this is the point of his entire discussion of the issue—there is ultimately no difference between substance and the species, or quiddity, of a thing, because substance is the ultimate genus in which all species coincide: «Principiata igitur, quae contrarie dividuntur, habent principium eo modo indivisibile. Ideo contraria eiusdem sunt generis» (ibid., ch. 27, p. 35).

issue of universals is treated specifically in Chapter 6 (*De complicatione et gradibus contractionis universi*), and Chapter 9 (*De anima sive forma universi*). The discussions in these chapters are especially interesting for our purposes because here Cusanus clearly states his position on an issue that stood at the centre of fifteenth-century scholastic debates, namely, that regarding the type of existence possessed by universals.<sup>78</sup>

In Chapter 6, Cusanus tells us that the *Peripatetici* were correct to say that universals have no actual existence outside of particulars. But neither are they merely rational entities: “the line and the surface, although they are not found outside a body, nevertheless are not rational entities only, because they are in a body just as universals are in particulars”.<sup>79</sup> Not the universal itself, therefore, but only the abstraction of the intellect regarding it is a merely rational entity. The common nature of dogs and other animals of shared species is really *in* them, and this nature would have been contracted in them regardless of whether any intellect had fabricated for itself a species through comparison of likenesses.<sup>80</sup>

While Cusanus has often been identified as a kind of nominalist,<sup>81</sup> it is clear from this and other passages that he upholds a moderate realism on the existence of universals.<sup>82</sup> While he does not accord to universals actual existence in the absence of particulars, in fact neither did the realists, who never maintained the existence of universals apart from

<sup>78</sup> For detailed information regarding medieval debates on the nature of universals, see de Libera, A. *La querelle des universaux : de Platon à la fin du Moyen Âge*. Paris: Seuil, 1996.

<sup>79</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. II, ch. 6, p. 80: « Non sunt universalis solum entia rationis, licet non reperiantur extra singularia actu; sicut et linea et superficies, licet extra corpus non reperiantur, propterea non sunt entia rationis tantum, quoniam sunt in corpore sicut universalis in singularibus. »

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 80–81: « Canes enim et cetera animalia eiusdem speciei uniuntur propter naturam communem specificam, quae in eis est; quae etiam in ipsis contracta esset, si Platonis intellectus species ex comparatione similitudinum sibi non fabricaret. »

<sup>81</sup> For example, the article on Cusanus in the *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, which in addition to the influence of neoPlatonism, identifies “[...] [den] die Bedeutung der Erfahrung betonende[n] Nominalismus [...]” as characteristic of Cusan philosophy (Article: “Nikolaus von Kues”, Band 2. Mittelstraß, J., ed. Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1984, 1018–1020); cf. also Hoffmann, F. “Nominalistische Vorläufer für die Erkenntnisproblematik bei Nikolaus von Kues” in *MFCG* 11. Trier: Paulinus, 1975, 125–167: “Allerdings läßt sich nicht übersehen, daß seine [Cusanus’] kritische Einstellung zur menschlichen Erkenntnis auf der Linie der durch den Nominalismus verbreiteten Erkenntnis-kritik liegt” (p. 125); cf. also Moffitt Watts (1982), pp. 70–71.

<sup>82</sup> Flasch acknowledges that Cusanus takes a realist view of universals beginning with *Idiota de sapientia*, but thinks that this replaced an earlier nominalist outlook (Flasch [1998], pp. 260–261). This is however not the case, since, as we show here, a thoroughly realist view of universals was articulated already in *De docta ignorantia*.

particular instantiation (as in a Platonic realm of pure forms) and who, like Cusanus, differentiated between the universal *in re*, which was the true nature of the thing, and the universal *post rem*, which was the species, and an “intentional sign” or abstraction.<sup>83</sup> It is furthermore notable, that the position on universals represented by Cusanus is closest to the view held by the Thomists, who were stricter Aristotelians than other realists.<sup>84</sup> Thus Moffitt Watts is wrong to assert that Cusanus’ position on universals reflects his “nominalist tendencies”, and that it is closest to the view of Ockham.

Misreading the same discussion of universals (i.e. h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. II, ch. 6), Moffitt Watts is led to assert that Cusanus’ position on universals is “ambiguous”, when in fact it is clear and, moreover, entirely traditional. Watts is unable to reconcile Cusanus’ statement that universals exist in act only in particulars with a subsequent statement which she interprets to mean that the intellect, through abstraction, makes uni-

---

<sup>83</sup> As described, for example, by the Albertist Heymericus de Campo in his *Tractatus problematicus* (1423): « Universale in re est vera natura rei, sed universale post rem est species seu signum intentionale non coincidens cum natura rei » (Meersseman, G. *Geschichte des Albertismus*, Heft 2: *Die ersten Kölner Kontroversen*. Rome, 1935 [*Dissertationes historicae* 5]).

<sup>84</sup> Johannes Parreut, a 15th-century nominalist from Ingolstadt, clearly outlines the difference of opinion between Thomists and Scotists (both realists) on the subject of universals: « Modus ponendi universale Scotistarum est talis in re, sicut in homine : Natura vel quidditas, quantum est de se praeter operationem intellectus, est communicabilis pluribus singularibus et habet unitatem sibi propriam, [...]. Modus ponendi Thomistarum est talis; Universale, quando capitur pro natura universali vel communi, sicut est humanitas, est duplex, scilicet in potentia et in actu; Universale in potentia est ipsa quidditas vel natura, quae est in re singulari [...]. Universale autem in actu est ipsa natura denudata per intellectum a conditionibus individuantes [...]. [...] Scotus tenet, quod haec natura, quae universalis dicitur, sit realiter eadem cum singulari; sed Thomas non admittet, sed natura realiter distinguitur a singulari » (Parreut, J. *Exercitata veteris artis*. Ingolstadt, 1492 [München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Inc. 931 m). *Quaestio* I]). The Thomistic position furthermore differs from that of the Albertists, who regarded the universal *in re* and *post rem* to have an analogical identity, as represented by Heymericus de Campo: « Manet tamen ibi identitas analogiae et proportionis ad unam essentiam ; [...] et hoc modo intelligo doctorem meum Albertum magnum » (Heymericus de Campo, *ibid.*). It can be seen that Cusanus’ account is closest to the Thomistic one described above: namely, that the universal taken as the quiddity or species of a thing is an abstraction which exists in the mind *in actu* and in the thing *in potentia*; and that the universal taken as the nature of a thing is actually in that thing. The universal *post rem*, then, on the Thomist account, is a mental abstraction, or concept, based on comparison of the natures instantiated in individual things (the universal *in re*)—which Cusanus also affirms in the following passage: « Quare universalia, quae ex comparatione facit, sunt similitudo universalium contractorum in rebus; quae in ipso intellectu iam sunt contracte, antequam etiam exteris illis notis explicet per intelligere, quod est operari ipsius. » h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. II, ch. 6, p. 81.

versals exist outside of things.<sup>85</sup> She regards these as two separate and conflicting positions, the first being realist and the latter being a quasi-Ockhamist, nominalist position. In so doing, she creates a false problem, which, she states, Cusanus then tries to resolve, but in a way which would fail to satisfy Ockham.<sup>86</sup>

In fact, there is neither a “contradictory position” here, nor any indication that Cusanus perceived it as such. In the aforementioned passage from *De docta*, Cusanus does not mean that the intellect “creates” universals, or species, to exist extramentally (a position which is neither realist nor nominalist). By « extra res » he was simply referring to the process of abstraction whereby the intellect creates a universal in the mind as a similitude of the nature it perceives in the thing.<sup>87</sup> Cusanus merely presents, therefore, in a matter of fact sort of way, a position on universals which he clearly regards as uncontroversial—appropriately, since it in fact represents the standard Thomistic position. Her misconstrual of Cusanus’ position on universals has the consequence of unfairly representing Cusanus as a failed nominalist, when there is no attempt in Cusanus to develop a nominalist position on universals.<sup>88</sup>

While his position on universals thus confirms to a significant extent the Aristotelian view, Cusanus also sharply criticizes Aristotle and the Peripatetics in this chapter for denying the extra-mental existence of forms. For the divine intellect, he writes, surely requires an idea through which to unfold itself temporally,<sup>89</sup> and in this respect the Platonists were correct to

<sup>85</sup> « Intellectus tamen facit ea [universalia] extra res per abstractionem esse » (h *ibid.*, p. 80 21–22).

<sup>86</sup> “Cusanus is aware of the contradictory nature of his position here and attempts a kind of resolution of the Platonic and nominalistic elements in it. While asserting, as above, that universals exist by intellectual abstraction, he also seems to assign real existence to them, as, for instance, in the case of species. Ockham would not have agreed with this position” (Moffitt Watts [1982], pp. 70–71).

<sup>87</sup> As though to ward off such misreading, Cusanus even appended to the sentence in question the following caveat: « Quae quidem abstractio est ens rationis, quoniam absolutum esse eis convenire non potest. Universale enim penitus absolutum Deus est. » (h *De docta*, p. 80 22–24).

<sup>88</sup> Moffitt Watts later states that, in *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus maintained a position of “moderate realism” on universals, but by *Idiota de mente* had “moved closer to contemporary nominalist and humanist thinking on universals, anticipating his own position in *De beryllo*” (*ibid.*, p. 227). There is however nothing in the latter texts to indicate a change of position from *De docta ignorantia*.

<sup>89</sup> h *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. II, ch. 9, p. 93: « Peripatetici vero quamvis fateantur opus naturae esse opus intelligentiae, exemplaria tamen illa non admittunt; quos certe, nisi per intelligentiam Deum intelligant, deficere puto. Nam si non est notitia in intelligentia,

assert the necessity of a simple intelligence, or world soul, that enfolds in itself all essences.<sup>90</sup> Aristotle is thus rebuked for attempting to refute the Platonists “more on the surface with words than at the core with understanding,” when the latter had in fact discussed the issue “in a sufficiently acute and reasonable way”.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, despite this reproach, Cusanus’ position on universals represents a clear synthesis of the Platonic and the Aristotelian views, as his final remarks on the subject manifest:

Forms, therefore, actually exist only in the Word as the Word and in things contractedly. But the forms that are in the created intellectual nature, although they are more absolutely according to the intellectual nature, nevertheless are not without contraction, for they are of the intellect, whose operation is to understand through abstract similitude, as Aristotle says.<sup>92</sup>

### *On the Unity of the Intellectual Tradition*

As we have already seen, references to Aristotle in Cusanus’ works are often part of a larger discussion of ancient philosophy or of the entire intellectual tradition, the essential unity of which Cusanus frequently seeks to illustrate through examples. We see this very clearly in Book I of *De docta ignorantia*, in a discussion of how not only Plato and Platonists like Augustine and Boethius, but also Aristotle and the Peripatetics, were all heirs to the Pythagorean number theory.<sup>93</sup> This is interesting, as it is

---

quomodo movet secundum propositum? Si est notitia rei explicandae temporaliter, quae est ratio motus, talis a re, quae nondum est temporaliter, abstrahi non potuit. Si igitur est notitia sine abstractione, certe tunc est illa, de qua loquuntur Platonici, quae non est rebus, sed res secundum eam.»

<sup>90</sup> This ‘simple intelligence’ is of course none other than the *Verbum Dei*, or Christ, who is himself the form of forms, and the very possibility of contraction: «[...] Verbum, quod est ratio et idea atque absoluta rerum necessitas [...]» (ibid., Bk. 2, ch. 7, p. 83).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Bk. II, ch. 9, p. 94: «Acute satis atque rationabiliter locuti sunt Platonici, forte irrationabiliter per Aristotelem reprehensi, qui potius in cortice verborum quam medullari intelligentia eos redarguere nisus est.»

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., Bk. II, ch. 9, 5–10, p. 96: «Non sunt igitur formae actu nisi in Verbo ipsum Verbum et in rebus contracte. Formae autem, quae sunt in natura intellectuali creata, licet secundum intellectualem naturam sint magis absolute, tamen sine contractione non sunt, ut sint intellectus, cuius operatio est intelligere per similitudinem abstractivam, ut ait Aristoteles.»

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Bk. I, ch. 11, pp. 23–24: «Quomodo Aristoteles, qui singularis videri voluit priores confutando, aliter nobis in Metaphysicis specierum differentiam tradere potuit quam quod ipsas numeris compararet? Et idem dum de formis naturalibus, quomodo una sit in alia, scientiam tradere vellet, ad formas mathematicas necessario convolvit dicens: ‘Sicut trigonus in tetragono, ita inferior in superiori.’ [...] Et si velis, ut compendiosius dicam: Nonne Epicurorum de atomis et inani sententia, quae et Deum negat et cunctam veritatem collidit, solum a Pythagoricis et Peripateticis mathematica demonstratione periit?»



one of the passages used to substantiate Cusanus' strong association of Platonism with Pythagoreanism.<sup>94</sup> However it can be seen here that he regards Pythagoras as the common ancestor of both the Platonic and Peripatetic traditions.

This desire to harmonize the writings of the philosophers only grew stronger towards the end of his life, as evinced by *De venatione sapientiae*, Chapters VIII and IX of which are significantly entitled "How Plato and Aristotle have conducted their hunt", and "How the sacred writings and the philosophers have named the same things in different ways".<sup>95</sup> In the latter chapter, not only are the writings of the philosophers shown to be compatible with theology, but the unity and agreement between the philosophers themselves is also emphasized, although it is admitted that Plato did see better than Aristotle.<sup>96</sup>

In his epilogue to this same work, Cusanus neatly summarizes his view of the essential unity of the philosophers by showing, through a series of examples, how Plato, Proclus, Aristotle, and the Peripatetics each confirmed, in their own ways, that the unity of every multitude is the one origin '*per se*', which is the ultimate 'potential-to-become' of all things. He concludes by saying, "those are the expressions of the Platonics and the Peripatetics, which one must correctly understand in respect to the origin and cause."<sup>97</sup>

One further way in which Cusanus seeks to establish the continuity between pagan philosophy and Christian theology is through ancient pre-figurations of the Trinity. Although this is a theme that arises more often in the sermons, it does emerge, for example, in *De beryllo*, where he seeks not only to show that Plato and Aristotle saw the necessity of a triune structure in the origin, but further to harmonize their philosophies by asserting Anaxagoras as their common teacher on the subject, who "opened both Plato's as well as Aristotle's eyes".<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> For example, Christoph Horn in his article "Cusanus über Platon und dessen Pythagoreismus" in *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. K. Reinhardt and H. Schwaetzer, eds. Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag, 2007, 9–32, p. 11 and n. 16.

<sup>95</sup> In *De venatione sapientiae*, ch. 8, 19 and ch. 9, 23: « Quomodo Plato et Aristoteles venationem fecerunt »; « Quomodo sacrae litterae et philosophi idem varie nominarunt ».

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., ch. 9, 23ff.

<sup>97</sup> « Illa dicta sunt Platoniorum et Peripateticorum, quae oportet sane intelligi quoad principium et causam. » Ibid., ch. 39, 120, 15–16.

<sup>98</sup> « Tetigerunt philosophi hanc trinitatem, quam viderunt in principio esse, a causato ad causam ascendendo. Anaxagoras et ante eum Hermotimus Clazomenius, ut vult Aristoteles, fuit primus, qui intellectuale vidit principium. Quem Plato extulit eius libros saepissime legens, quia visum sibi fuit, quod magistrum invenisset. Et quae Plato de eo

### CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION: RETHINKING CUSANUS AND THE ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHY

In summary, we have seen that there are numerous references to Aristotle based on direct engagement with the source text, particularly with the *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although Cusanus' late period is commonly associated with an increased engagement with Platonism, it is clear from the number of references to Aristotle in the texts belonging to the phase of production beginning with *De beryllo* that this was accompanied by a heightened interest in Aristotle. And while Cusanus considers Plato to have had the superior philosophy overall, it is certain not only that Cusanus had great respect for Aristotle, but that he continued to find study of the philosopher's works valuable up to the final years of his life. Therefore we may conclude that the extent of Cusanus' appreciation for and use of the Philosopher in his works has generally been underacknowledged.

We saw that references to Aristotle in *De docta ignorantia* centre around a discussion of the nature of forms, or universals. Here Cusanus gives an account of universals which makes no reference to any scholastic sources but nevertheless expresses a position equivalent to that defended by realists in the universities at that time. *De beryllo* and *De non aliud* discussed the nature of substance as put forth by Aristotle; but while the former text stopped at pointing out how Aristotle was unable to come to a certain conclusion regarding the ultimate nature of substance, and particularly its relation to form, the latter text goes further and actually seeks to instruct Aristotle. By applying his own method of reasoning to the Philosopher's arguments, Cusanus shows how the latter *could* have found the answer he was seeking.

We saw especially in *De non aliud* that Cusanus does not view the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a rejection of Aristotelian reason. The principle of non-contradiction governs the realm of ordinary reason; however, through a special, *anterioriter* application of reason one may come to see the necessity of the higher intellectual principle in which contraries coincide. This higher form of knowledge, called learned ignorance, is not incompatible with the lower form, since the higher is the enfolding principle of the lower, just as *intellectus* is the enfolding principle of *ratio*.

---

dicit, illa et Aristoteles. Ipse enim Anaxagoras tam Platoni quam Aristoteli oculos aperuit. » In *De beryllo*, ch. 23, p. 27.

Thus we may confirm Ulli Roth's assessment that Cusanus dealt with the problem of the limitations of reason with respect to theological truths, not by rejecting reason in favour of fideism, but by appealing to a new and higher kind of rationality.<sup>99</sup> We must differ slightly with Stammkötter, who maintained that Cusanus perceived his new doctrine to represent "a break with the central principle of the theoretical philosophy that Aristotle developed in the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*".<sup>100</sup> While Cusanus was well aware of how such a doctrine would be received by the academic establishment, he nevertheless took great pains to demonstrate precisely the opposite, namely, that the coincidence of opposites does not destroy or reject the first principle of philosophy, but rather grounds and guarantees both its certitude and the certitude of all judgments made in accordance with it.

While it is evident that Cusanus went to great lengths to try to integrate the Aristotelian philosophy into his own teaching, it is true that he rejected the way this was taught in the universities, and that his own approach to the Philosopher was very different. Scholastics like Thomas Aquinas used Aristotle to construct Christian theology, but unlike Cusanus, they modelled their discourse according to the terminology of Aristotle. Particularly in *De non aliud*, we saw how Cusanus did quite the opposite, moulding Aristotle's ideas to fit the rubric of his own conceptual and terminological framework.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the tendency so pronounced in

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Roth (2000), pp. 31; 301.

<sup>100</sup> Stammkötter (2004), p. 433.

<sup>101</sup> Martin Thurner also remarked on how Cusanus "modifies" Aristotelian notions to fit within his own framework. In addition to his aforementioned remarks on Cusanus' use of *Met. I, 1*, he refers to the Cusan *anterioriter* method (which he calls an "Erkenntnisregress") whereby one reasons backwards from effects to their necessary cause, as a modification of the Aristotelian notion of philosophy as the search for first causes (re. *Met.* 981–982). The modification being that this process is conceived by Cusanus as a function of the revelation of divine knowledge to man: "Die Rückführung von Wirkungen auf ihre Ursache wurde bereits von Aristoteles als jene Wesensbestimmung benannt, durch die sich das philosophische Denken ursprünglich von allen anderen menschlichen Erkenntnisarten [...] unterscheidet. Indem Cusanus dem rationalen Begründungsregress eine Funktion im Offenbarungsgeschehen zuerkennt, kann er zugleich das (aristotelische) Verständnis der Philosophie als theoretischer Wissenschaft der ersten Gründe und Ursachen vertiefend modifizieren" (Thurner [2001], pp. 163–164). Thurner also maintains that in its particulars Cusanus' application of negative theology is more Aristotelian than Platonic. In a passage from *De dato pater luminum* 5, according to Thurner: "[...] wendet Cusanus seine Methode des Erkenntnisaufstiegs durch Negation nicht wie zuletzt auf die platonische, sondern auf aristotelische Arten der Klassifizierung der Verschiedenheit der Weltseienden an. Dabei beginnt er mit dem von Aristoteles in seiner Kategorientafel zusammengefassten allgemeinsten Bestimmungsschema für die Eigenschaften der Dinge. [...] Die kategoriale Verschiedenheit erleuchtet also den menschlichen Intellekt, indem sie ihm zu

Cusanus to try to harmonize the Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies was not typical of scholasticism, which, when it did utilize Plato, adhered closely to Aristotle's interpretation of him, especially in Thomistic circles.<sup>102</sup> The stark contrast between the scholastic use of Aristotle and Cusanus' own unorthodox approach is well-exemplified by the nature of his argument with Wenck, which, as we saw, did not revolve around any detailed discussion of philosophical notions or the correct interpretation of Aristotle. Wenck simply recognized that Cusanus' use of Aristotle was not Aristotelian in the accepted, scholastic sense, and reacted to what he perceived as a threat to academic and theological orthodoxy. And Cusanus in turn, recognized and dismissed Wenck as an adherent of the 'Aristotelian sect', stubbornly clinging to the authority of tradition.<sup>103</sup>

Despite these differences, however, it is not the case that Cusanus proffered his new doctrine and methodology as a replacement for scholastic theology or Aristotelian science as such. Rather it is evident that he considered his work to represent the positive development and revitalization of both. It was as a *reformatio generalis* of theological science, one which moreover maintained the unity of the intellectual and philosophical traditions, that Cusanus advanced his teaching on the coincidence of opposites.

In this connection, Stammkötter has shown convincingly that Cusanus' position on the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction did not fall entirely 'out of the blue', and that there is in fact a historical development of this principle within medieval philosophy, which moreover may be seen to open the door to Cusanus' interpretation. According to Stammkötter's account, while medievals up to Albert contented them-

---

verstehen gibt, dass das Wesen ihres einheitlichen Grundes selbst über-kategorial ist. Der durch die negierende Aufhebung aller endlichen Einschränkungen ermöglichte Aufstieg [...] wird [...] in der Begrifflichkeit der aristotelischen Prädikabilien durchgeführt" (ibid., pp. 147–148). This highlights an important point with reference to Cusanus' approach to the Aristotelian philosophy: the latter has a necessary place *within* the method of learned ignorance, insofar as it is only through a stepwise process of recognizing how the divine nature exceeds every category of human reason that the understanding is able to ascend towards a higher intellectual apprehension of God.

<sup>102</sup> On Thomas' criticism of Plato, see Hoenen, M. "Modus loquendi platoniorum". Johannes Gerson und seine Kritik an Platon und den Platonisten" in Gersh, S. and Hoenen, M., eds. (2002), 325–344, pp. 335–338.

<sup>103</sup> Stammkötter also remarked on the surprisingly limited role played by the principle of non-contradiction in the debate between Cusanus and Wenck, despite the use of Aristotle being the key bone of philosophical contention between them, and suggested that Wenck's preoccupation with orthodoxy was exemplary of late-medieval philosophical debates (Stammkötter [2004], pp. 443–444).

selves with the Aristotelian view that this foundational principle of philosophy was necessarily indemonstrable, Thomas went a step further: Insofar as reason seeks to know what is, all of its insights—including the principle of non-contradiction—are bound to being. For this reason, Thomas thought it should be possible to provide a philosophical foundation for the principle.<sup>104</sup>

This account is indeed supported by Thomas' commentary on the *Metaphysics*, where his assertion that the basic intellectual operations through which we reason can be performed only by virtue of a (logically) prior understanding of being establishes the necessity of a unity underlying Aristotle's first principle; one which both precedes that principle and yet, as its ground, is fundamentally intellectual, and thus is in some way accessible to the understanding.<sup>105</sup> In so doing, Thomas has already laid the essential groundwork for Cusanus' position. For it is arguably just an extension of this reasoning to infer that a) because the *ens* underlying the principle of non-contradiction precedes all contrariness and contradiction, all contraries "coincide" in this primary unity; and b) because all understanding is grounded in the primary unity of being, reason itself is grounded in an intellectual principle which exceeds the constraints of rationality.

---

<sup>104</sup> "Thomas von Aquin stimmt Albert in seiner Beurteilung des Satzes vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch zu [...]. Aber er macht auch auf einen wichtigen Unterschied aufmerksam: [...] Alle Einsicht der Vernunft, wenn sie das, was ist, erkennen will, ist an das Sein gebunden. Auch der Satz vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch, der ja die Möglichkeiten der Unterscheidung verbürgt [...], ist also an die Einsicht der Vernunft in das Sein gebunden. Er stellt daher konsequent fest, daß der Satz doch nicht ganz so unmittelbar einleuchten kann, wie Aristoteles und Albert das gesehen haben: Der Satz vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch hängt vom Sein ab. [...] Damit hat Thomas den von Albert übernommenen Rahmen des Aristoteles erweitert. [...] Indem er den Satz an die Erkenntnis des Seins bindet, läßt er aber im Gegensatz zum 'Philosophen' und zu seinem Lehrer die prinzipielle Unbeweisbarkeit des Satzes so nicht stehen, sondern versucht, auch diesem sichersten Prinzip ein philosophisches Fundament zu geben." Stammkötter (2004), pp. 435–436.

<sup>105</sup> Here Thomas writes: « Ad huius autem evidentiam sciendum est, quod, cum duplex sit operatio intellectus: una, qua cognoscit quod quid est, quae vocatur indivisibilium intelligentia; alia, qua componit et dividit: in utroque est aliquod primum: in prima quidem operatione est aliquod primum, quod cadit in conceptione intellectus, scilicet hoc quod dico ens; nec aliquid hac operatione potest mente concipi, nisi intelligatur ens. Et quia hoc principium, impossibile est esse et non esse simul, dependet ex intellectu entis, sicut hoc principium, omne totum est maius sua parte, ex intellectu totius et parties: ideo hoc etiam principium est naturaliter primum in secunda operatione intellectus, scilicet componentis et dividendis. Nec aliquis potest secundum hanc operationem intellectus aliquid intelligere, nisi hoc principio intellecto. Sicut enim totum et partes non intelliguntur nisi intellecto ente, ita nec hoc principium omne totum est maius sua parte, nisi intellecto praedicto principio firmissimo » Cathala, M. and Spiazzi, R., eds. *Thomas. In quattuordecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*. Turin, 1964. Lib. IV, lect. 6, n. 10.

This interpretation is furthermore consonant with Cusanus' own view of the relation of his doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* to the Aristotelian first principle as presented in *De non aliud*, where he attempted to show how the former was merely the properly logical terminus of the latter. While there is no evidence of direct influence of Thomas' commentary on the *Metaphysics* on Cusanus' interpretation of the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction (there is no copy of this work in the Cardinal's library collection, for example), it is at least evident that Cusanus' doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* does not represent such a radical break away from scholastic Aristotelianism as has previously been thought.

It is interesting that readers of Cusanus since Wenck have nonetheless generally followed the latter's assessment that the *coincidentia oppositorum* entails the wholesale rejection of the principle of non-contradiction and thus is simply incompatible with Aristotelian philosophy. Accordingly, many contemporary readers tend to view the Cardinal as a hopeless interpreter of Aristotle, whose bizarre appropriation of the Stagirite's philosophy fails to understand its basic principles. In a recent paper,<sup>106</sup> Clyde Lee Miller described Cusanus' discussion of Aristotle in *De beryllo* in such terms, saying that Cusanus reifies the notions of matter, form, and privation<sup>107</sup> in order to bring them into an apparent tension which is not really present in Aristotle (to whom these were only conceptually distinct aspects of a substance), which is then resolved by showing how all three coincide in an original unity.<sup>108</sup> He attributes Cusanus' unusual interpretation of Aristotle to the Cardinal's "Neoplatonic" orientation, which privi-

---

<sup>106</sup> I am referring here, with permission of the author, to "Aristotle in Nicholas of Cusa's *De beryllo*"—a yet-unpublished paper presented by Clyde Lee Miller on March 20, 2009 at the sessions of the Cusanus Society of America at the annual RSA conference in Los Angeles, California.

<sup>107</sup> For Aristotle's main discussions of the nature of "privation" see *Physics* 1, 7–8, and *Metaphysics* 4, 2; 7, 7; 9, 2; and 12, 2.

<sup>108</sup> "That Cusanus wants to imagine form, matter and privation as three separate, almost independent, principles in fact stretches Aristotle's doctrine. The actual composite substance is nothing separate from its form and its matter and the latter are nothing apart from each other. No third principle is needed to unite them. (There is no need in Aristotle of a further nexus or union between them, which may be why Cusanus turns to privation to find a nexus of contraries.) Moreover, any privation associated with a substance is possible, not actual, and is the analytic result of our counterfactual understanding that the matter or subject of change could have perhaps become something else and our subsequent discovery that change is between contraries". Miller (2009)

leges potentiality over actuality, whereas to Aristotle this order was the reverse.<sup>109</sup>

While Miller rightly points out that Cusanus makes more of the notion of privation than Aristotle himself had, this is because Nicolaus thinks he recognizes in it an inchoate grasp that something must underlie contraries such that they are able to become one thing or another—an observation which is actually well substantiated by the text. Indeed, in *Physics* 1, 7, Aristotle asserts that contraries cannot be the ultimate principle of things, and that there must also be a substratum which is (metaphysically) different from and prior to them.<sup>110</sup> Aristotle remained undecided as to whether the substratum or the form is the most essential nature of a substance, but had no doubts regarding the necessity of this third principle:

Whether the form or the substratum is the essential nature of a physical object is not yet clear. But that the principles are three, and in what sense, and the way in which each is a principle, is clear.<sup>111</sup>

Miller's assertion that there is no need for a third principle in Aristotle's scheme seems inconsistent with the Philosopher's own words, and a close examination of Cusanus shows that he is a better reader of Aristotle than he is generally given credit for. These passages also very clearly substantiate Cusanus' own interpretation in *De beryllo*.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> "Aristotle might be amused at the sort of imaginative speculation involved here, since his view that privation is solely potential does give privation positive metaphysical standing, but not more than it merits—as potentiality—in an ontological system that privileges form and actuality over potentiality. Here we uncover in an unlikely discussion that ongoing important difference between Aristotelian and Christian Neoplatonic thinking. Actuality precedes and is what reveals possibility for Aristotle, while what is possible, especially what is in God's power, determines what is actual for Nicholas' way of thinking" (ibid.).

<sup>110</sup> "There is a sense, therefore, in which we must declare the principles to be two, and a sense in which they are three; a sense in which the contraries are the principles—say for example the musical and the unmusical, the hot and the cold, the tuned and the untuned—and a sense in which they are not, since it is impossible for the contraries to be acted on by each other. But this difficulty also is solved by the fact that the substratum is different from the contraries, for it is itself not a contrary. The principles therefore are, in a way, not more in number than the contraries, but as it were two, nor yet precisely two, since there is a difference of essential nature, but three." Cornford, F., trans. *Aristotle. The Physics, Books I–IV* (Loeb Classical Library, No. 228). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986. Book I, 7.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Nicolaus was probably basing his remarks on the *Metaphysics* (The extent of his familiarity with the *Physics* is unclear: there is no copy of it in his library collection, although he did have a copy of Aegidius Romanus' commentary). The same schema is however presented in this work: *Metaphysics* 12, 2: "The causes and the principles, then,



Nor is it accurate to say that Cusanus viewed matter, form, and privation as independent entities. Miller himself points out that Cusanus takes Aristotle's side over Plato on the issue of separate species, and we have already discussed the fact that, to Cusanus, forms have independent existence from matter only by mental abstraction;<sup>113</sup> thus there is no ground for the accusation that Cusanus regards matter and form as 'separate'. Neither is this the case with privation, since, to Cusanus, it is but the metaphysical substratum of form and matter, and hence immanent to both:

And because [Aristotle] saw the necessity of a third principle and that this had to be privation, he made privation a principle *without position*.<sup>114</sup>

Clearly, Cusanus understands that, as sheer potentiality, privation has no "position" in substances, i.e., does not have the same type of existence as substances. However he also recognizes that Aristotle cannot with such qualifications avoid positing a certain "inchoateness" within substances, and it is this for which he feels Aristotle has inadequately accounted, and which would be better understood by his own theory of connection, or *nexus*.<sup>115</sup> Cusanus' point in *De beryllo* was not to oppose actuality to potentiality, nor to privilege the latter over the former, but rather to show that what Aristotle called privation is really something located prior to *both* potentiality and actuality. Elsewhere, Cusanus seeks to name God's power in a way that reflects this unity prior to potentiality and actuality with names like *poss-est* and *posse ipsum*—which are intended to reflect the notion of God being at once absolute potentiality and absolute actuality.

To seek to explain away the idiosyncrasies of Cusanus' interpretation of Aristotle by attributing them to his Neoplatonic orientation is an oversimplification of the matter which misses the point of Cusanus' own engagement with the Philosopher in his later works; for it makes little sense that

---

are three, two being the pair of contraries of which one is definition and form and the other is privation, and the third being the matter". Tredennick, trans. (1961–2). It may be added that Cusanus in no way rejects hylomorphism, and that Hopkins' criticism of Flasch (Hopkins [2000], pp. 94–96), who claimed to find in *De beryllo* a radical rejection of hylomorphic physics (Flasch [1998], pp. 473–475), is entirely in order. Flasch was, however, not entirely wrong to assert that Cusanus was attempting a 'reform of physics', to the extent that Nicolaus' intent was to modify and thereby improve Aristotle's hylomorphic doctrine (ibid., p. 474).

<sup>113</sup> See above section "On the subject of forms/universals".

<sup>114</sup> « Et quia [Aristoteles] vidit tertium principium necessarium et esse debere privationem, fecit privationem *sine positione* principium. » h *De beryllo*, ch. 25, p. 32; my italics.

<sup>115</sup> « Post hoc non valens bene evadere quandam videtur inchoationem formarum in materia ponere quae si acute inspicitur, est in re nexus, de quo loquor. Sed sic non intelligit nec nominat » (ibid.).

Cusanus would return to Aristotle in such a concerted fashion if he had already rejected his philosophy for an ostensibly opposing, Neoplatonic world-view. Rather, Cusanus takes up the *Metaphysics* with renewed interest precisely because he is excited to find in it a system of thought which he believes to be fundamentally in accord with his own doctrine of learned ignorance, and because he thinks that to expand upon the nature of this compatibility strengthens both doctrines. Cusanus' project in *De beryllo* and *De non aliud* was to modify the Aristotelian framework to produce a more successful yet compatible result—not simply to replace it with a different model. Indeed, it is evident in these later works that Cusanus *believes* he has successfully integrated the Aristotelian philosophy with his own. A more fruitful approach to the issue of Cusanus and Aristotle is therefore to examine the reasons underlying Cusanus' interpretation of the latter's doctrines, taking seriously the Cardinal's assertion that Aristotle could have been brought to see that contraries coincide in the absolute origin—a position he does defend on the basis of legitimate textual evidence.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ARTICULATION OF FAITH AND REASON IN CUSAN PREDICATION<sup>1</sup>

Discussions of faith are spread across Cusanus' predicative oeuvre, and we find no fundamental alterations in his position on the relation of faith and reason over the years.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the same motifs and arguments recur throughout his work, from his earliest to his latest sermons. One does find, however, a marked and continual development in these discussions, which grow in length and complexity, from short excurses in the earlier sermons to longer and more complex investigations in the later ones, some of which comprising the entire sermon. These discussions

---

<sup>1</sup> The most recent general introduction to Cusanus' sermons may be found in Euler, W. et al. trans. and eds. *Nikolaus von Kues. Predigten in deutscher Übersetzung. Band 3. Sermones CXXII–CCIII* Münster: Aschendorff, 2007. xv–xxxiii. A more detailed and still excellent source of information is Bohnenstädt's preface to the German translation of the early sermons in Sikora, J. and Bohnenstädt, E., trans. *Predigten. 1430–1441*. Heidelberg: F.H. Kerle Verlag, 1952, 7–60. And of course, there is also Haubst's *praefatio generalis* to the sermons in the Heidelberg edition (cf. h *Sermones I (1430–1441)*. Hamburg: Meiner, 1991. ix–xlv). Recent studies of Cusan predication include: Hoenen, M. "Caput scholae rationis est Christus". Verschränkung von Exegese und Philosophie in den Predigten des Cusanus" in *MFCG* 30 (Kremer, K., and Reinhardt, K., eds. *Die Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues. Merkmale und ihre Stellung innerhalb der mittelalterlichen Predigtkultur*). Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 43–69; Aris, M.-A.: "Zur Soziologie der Sermones-recipienten" in *ibid.* 93–115; Hundersmarck, L. and Izbicki, T. "Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons on the Incarnation: An Early Renaissance Philosopher-Theologian as Preacher" in Izbicki, T. and Bellitto, C., eds. *Nicholas Of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 80–88; Euler, W. "Does Nicholas of Cusa have a Theology of the Cross?" in *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), 405–420. In terms of characterizing Cusanus' sermons in the context of late-medieval German predication, Mertens maintains they are most similar to the work of prominent 15th-century preacher Geiler von Keyserberg (cf. Mertens, V. "Die Predigt des Nikolaus von Kues im Kontext der volkssprachlichen Kanzelrede" in *ibid.* 171–190, p. 172). On late-medieval German predication cf. Schiewer, H.-J. "German Sermons in the Middle Ages" in Kienzle, B., ed. *The Sermon*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, 861–956 (esp. pp. 905–924).

<sup>2</sup> Euler confirms this position, making furthermore the good point that, had Cusanus changed his position on anything fundamental over the years, he certainly would have edited it out when preparing the Vatican manuscript collection of his sermons—since we know that he revised his sermons for this publication, and also that he was willing to exclude from his own collection works that he no longer endorsed (as he did *De concordantia catholica*). See Euler, W. "Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Etappen und Schwerpunkt-mässige Themenverschiebungen in den Sermones?" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 71–91, p. 76.

moreover expand to include the role of hope, love, and the will within the faith-reason matrix.

The sermons we will examine here range from 1446 to 1459. The majority of discussions of faith do occur in the sermons from the Brixen period, which is however most likely just a reflection of the fact the bulk of his sermons were composed during this time.<sup>3</sup> More significant is the concentration of discussions related to faith and reason around the time of his participation in the “Tegernsee” debate on mystical theology, some of which were certainly inspired by issues and questions brought up by the likes of Bernard of Waging, as evinced by certain references in Cusanus’ letters. We see this, for example, in Sermon 148 (March 17, 1454), which is dated one day prior to the letter to Bernard in which Cusanus responds at length to the prior’s doubts about the Cardinal’s intellectual approach to mystical theology.<sup>4</sup> In addition, three of the sermons we will examine from early July 1455 are likely among those Cusanus had in mind when he referred Bernard to his recent predication on the subject of “the coincidence of the motions of the intellect and love”.<sup>5</sup>

Detailed inspection of the sermons in which faith is discussed shows that, far from contradicting the philosophical and theological views presented in the treatises, the discussions of faith in the sermons serve to buttress Cusanus’ highly intellectual view of theology, even in those cases where faith is said to dominate or “conquer” reason. Indeed, discussions

---

<sup>3</sup> On the predication of Cusanus’ Brixen period, cf. Pauli, H. “Die geistige Welt der Brixener Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues” in *MFCG* 22. Trier: Paulinus, 1995, 163–186; “Euler, W. ‘Proclamation of Christ in Selected Sermons from Cusanus’ Brixen Period” in Izicki, T. and Bellitto, C., eds. *Nicholas Of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 89–103.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Cusanus to Waging, March 18, 1454 (Vansteenberghe [1915], pp. 134–135).

<sup>5</sup> In this letter, dated July 28 (approximately three weeks after the sermons in question), Cusanus advises Bernard: « Verum de coincidentia motuum intellectus et affectus aliqua in sermonibus huius anni, maxime festi purificationis, lacius locutus sum; et sermones suo tempore, quos nunc ordino ut scribantur, videbitis etc. » Letter of Cusanus to Waging, July 28, 1455 (Vansteenberghe [1915], pp. 159–160). The sermon collection to which Cusanus refers here must be that which ultimately became the Vatican manuscripts, although this was not completed until 1461, since it cannot refer to his first collection of sermons, which he had already given to Tegernsee in 1452 (receipt of which Aindorffer acknowledged in a letter to Cusanus, written prior to September 22, 1452, in which he reported that the collection had been “diligently and avidly copied by the brothers” (Vansteenberghe [1915], p. 109]).

of faith in the sermons often seek to show how it underpins and facilitates reason, and acts as the guarantor of rational truth.<sup>6</sup>

SERMON 60: *EGO RESUSCITABO EUM IN NOVISSIMO DIE* (1446)

Many of the themes that emerge in discussions of faith and reason in the sermons are the same as those we saw in the treatises. Correspondingly, one of the earliest relevant passages, from the sermon «*Ego resuscitabo eum in novissimo die*», focuses on a topic familiar from works like *Idiota de sapientia*, namely, the opposition of faith as a kind of ‘hearing’ to the direct ‘vision’ of knowing:

Therefore we hear in the word of the Son that which the Son sees. And in this, note the difference between that which we can grasp through hearing, and that which we can see. Thus through hearing, by way of faith, I grasp that which you say about the city, which unknown to me, is however known to you through vision. So we progress from hearing to vision, from faith, namely, to comprehension, and through hearing we are carried to the aspiration of vision, because otherwise we may not rest. And so here we are listeners, there we are viewers and tasters.<sup>7</sup>

With reference to John and Romans, Cusanus writes in this sermon of how Christ, as the Son of God, is witness to a truth of which we are only capable of hearing in this life, and of how Christ was sent in order that we would hear and have faith now, so that we will be able to see this truth directly after we are resurrected.<sup>8</sup> Thus in this sermon, “comprehension” of the truth is presented as something only attained in the after-life. Like in other discussions we have seen of faith as hearing, faith in Christ is asserted as something lesser than or inferior to actual vision, or direct experience of him. Believing is not as good as knowing, and man is

<sup>6</sup> This fact is furthermore consistent with the reputation Cusanus’ sermons had in his own day for being highly—to some of his listeners excessively—intellectual. Cusanus himself mentions facing complaints from some of his flock in this regard (h *Sermo* 274). This is oft-discussed in the literature. Cf., Schwaetzer, H. et al. (2007), p. xxiv; O’Malley (1979), p. 99; Euler (2002), p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> h *Sermo* 60, 14 1–14: «Nos igitur id audimus in verbo Filii, quod Filius vidit. Et in hoc nota differentiam inter id, quod nos capere possumus per auditum, et inter id, quod videmus. Unde per auditum via fidei capio id, quod loqueris de civitate mihi ignota, tibi autem visu nota. Sic pergitur de auditu ad visum, de fide scilicet ad comprehensionem, et trahimur auditu ad aspirationem visus, quia alias non quietamur. Et sic hic sumus audientes, ibi videntes et gustantes.»

<sup>8</sup> Re. John 6:46: «Non quia Patrem vidit quisquam nisi is qui est a Deo hic vidit Patrem», and Romans 10:17.

necessarily in a state of unrest until he has attained that vision whereby faith is replaced with the certainty and finality of first-hand knowledge.

SERMON 124: *VENIT FILIUS HOMINIS* (1452)

In one of his early Brixen sermons, « *Venit filius hominis* », we find a brief but interesting discussion of faith and its role in seeking knowledge, with reference to Luke 19:10: “The son of man is come to seek and to make saved that which was lost”:

The Gospel shows the coincidence by which to seek is to be sought. For Christ says: The son of man is come, etc., from which it is shown that he [i.e., Christ] sought Zachaeus, who was lost. [...]. But unless Zachaeus had been sought by Christ, he [i.e., Zachaeus] would not have sought him [i.e., Christ]. [...]. And so before he [i.e., Zachaeus] sought, and so long as he was seeking, he was sought. For unless he were to find what was sought, not knowing it, how would he find it? Etc. And why seek it unless to find it? [...]. Thus: Seek, and you shall find! Therefore man is aroused by the Word, which moves the consciousness to seek [it], just as an object excites a potency to strive for [it]. Hence it is required that faith come first. For faith is that which, having been heard, is grasped, and arouses the faithful to seeking the truth through hope. For only if there is hope that you can attain what you believe, will you not tire. [...].<sup>9</sup>

Cusanus uses this allegorical example to make the same epistemological justification for faith which we have encountered elsewhere in his treatises: namely, that the very search for something implies some prior knowledge of it and, in a sense, that one already possesses what is sought. Not only would Zachaeus not have been able to find Christ were Christ not already “seeking” him—i.e., unless there were already some connection between the seeker and his *desiderium*, but Zachaeus would not even have sought him in the first place. Christ is thus identified as the coincidence

<sup>9</sup> h *Sermo* 124, 1; 2 1–4, 9–10, 14–16; 3 1–2, 3–12: « *Venit filius hominis quaerere et saluum facere, quod perierat.* » Lucae 19. Evangelium ostendit coincidentiam, quo modo quaerere sit quaeri. Nam Christus dicit: *Venit filius hominis etc.* Ex quo patet, quod ipse quaesivit Zachaeum, qui perierat. [...]. Sed Zachaeus, nisi a Christo fuisset quaesitus, non quaesivisset ipsum. [...]. Et sic prior quaesivit, et dum quaereret, quaesitus est. Nisi enim ipse praeveniret quaerentem, eum ignorans quo modo quaereret? etc. Quaerere autem eius, quid est, nisi, ut quaeratur? [...] Quaerite igitur et invenietis! Excitatur igitur homo per Verbum, quod perambulat conscientiam, ut quaeratur, sicut obiectum excitat potentiam, ut quaerat. Oportet igitur, quod fides praecedat. Fides est enim, quae auditu capitur et excitat fidelem ad quaerendam mediante spe veritatem. Nisi enim spes esset, quod posses assequi id, quod credis, non te fatigares. »



of seeking and knowing, and as the faith inherent to the intellect itself. Reiterating the Augustinian notion that nothing wholly unknown can be desired, the aspect of this which Cusanus emphasizes here is the nature of that element in every striving to gain knowledge which must necessarily already be “known” in some way, in order for there even to be a striving for it.<sup>10</sup>

Faith, according to this account, is not just a striving of the consciousness, or mind, towards truth, but is at the same time a movement of that truth towards the mind. Man must first become aware of (hear) the Word, in order to begin to strive for it; thus it is necessary that faith come first. The Word “arouses” the mind by stimulating its natural capacity to know. Thus faith is described here, similarly as in the recently written *Idiota de mente*, as the mind’s potency, or capacity, for knowledge. The Word, as “heard”, is an external stimulus which is needed to actualize an innate potency or knowing faculty. Faith incites or stirs the intellect to seek the Word, and in this way is at once the cause and the object of knowledge. Faith is the *sine qua non* of the knowledge-process, in that it provides the initial stimulus without which there would be no intellectual movement. That faith is not just a voluntary movement of the mind to believe, but is something which incites a believing reaction from the mind, can only be due to a peculiar relation it bears to our mind’s structure. Cusanus will elaborate on the nature of this relation in Sermon 129.

#### SERMON 129: *FILII HUIUS SAECULI* (1453)

In «*Filii huius saeculi*», Cusanus thematizes light, identifying three stages, or degrees, of illumination, namely, the *lux corporalis*, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Augustine. *De trinitate* X, ch. 1, 3 (Mountain, ed. (1968). This element Cusanus repeatedly identifies as faith. Augustine does not make this connection in the discussion referred to above, which is focused on how knowledge of specific things is acquired, rather than on the ultimate principle of that possibility. However the mechanism he describes, whereby knowledge of things is acquired, is compatible with Cusanus’ own, e.g., as asserted in the above sermon. For Augustine goes on to explain that to “know” something unknown, is to know it *in general*, i.e., to have in advance a notion of its genus or species, or to see it “in the species of eternal reason”, whereby we possess in advance the forms of things which both stir us to seek instantiations of them in particulars and allow us to recognize those particulars as instantiations of their forms: « Aut enim iam genere notum habet quod amat idque nosse expetit etiam in aliqua singulari uel in singulis rebus [...] fingitque animo imaginarium formam qua excitetur in amorem. [...] Aut in specie sempiternae rationis uidemus aliquid et ii amamus, quod cum expressum in aliqua rei temporalis effigie [...] non aliquid amamus incognitum. » Ibid., ch. 2, 4.

*lux illuminatis*—which pertains to forms—and what he calls the *lux nobilissima*—which is only attainable through faith. Light is the most fundamental nature of all creation, Cusanus explains, because it is what God made first, when out of the primordial chaos he declared, “Fiat lux” (Gen. 1:3). This light is necessarily rational, since God created it only because he first saw it *in ratione*, and having so seen it, saw that it was good, and thus created it in the world:

So He saw, just as I see, through reason, that it would be good to have a ship so that I could cross the water; and having seen that, I make it. I saw the ship through reason, where it had neither mast nor planks, etc. But I made the ship there [i.e., in reason], and according to what I saw there, I made one out of planks. And so out of the primary matter or chaos, which came first according to Moses, there was made light. For because he saw the light through reason and saw that it was good, thus he said: Let there be light! And light was made.<sup>11</sup>

Because light is the *ratio* by which God brought the rest of creation into being, in every case *lux*, which is from the *Pater luminum*, is essentially intellectual, even as it pertains to material things:

Therefore just as the spoken word bears within itself the mental word, without which it could not be, so is the light which made the word a conceptual light. From this we see how the “light of light” is reason. And because nothing is without reason and is a rational light, no creature lacks the light. Light is form. For form illuminates the darkness of material, and light is drawn from the darkness and confusion [...]. And so nothing is without light, just as nothing is without form, which gives being to a thing.<sup>12</sup>

Thus light is also form, insofar as it gives not only being, but specific being to matter.

While nothing is without reason, everything is possessed of the rational light in differing degrees. For “[...] the nobler a thing is, the more light it possesses. And the more light, the more is its nature deiform to that which

<sup>11</sup> h *Sermo* 129, 3 4–14: « Sed vidit, sicut video in ratione bonum esse habere navem, ut possim transpire aquam, et id, quod vidi, facio. Vidi navem in ratione, ubi navis non habuit malum nec ligna etc. Sed ibi navis fuit, et secundum quod ibi vidi, facio de lignis. Sed sic ex materia prima seu chaos, quod praecedit secundum Moysen, facta est lux. Nam quia vidit lucem in ratione et ipsam apprehendit bonam, tunc dixit: Fiat lux! Et facta est lux. »

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3 15–4 3; 4 10–11: « Sicut igitur verbum vocale gerit intra se verbum mentale, sine quo esse nequit, sic facta lux verbum est lucis conceptae. Modo videamus ex hoc, quod lux lucis est ratio. Et quia nihil sine ratione et ratio lux, nulla creatura caret luce. Lux est forma. Nam forma illuminat tenebras materiae, et educitur lux de tenebra et confusione [...]. [...] Et sic nihil est sine luce, sicut nihil est sine forma, quae dat esse rei. »

is the 'light of light' ".<sup>13</sup> The intellectual light which pertains specifically to the forms of things is closer to the *Pater luminum* than that "corporeal light" which pertains to bodies. As a rational animal, man is therefore by nature the most deiform of all creatures.<sup>14</sup>

Man's intellect is distinguished by the fact that it is a similitude of the rational light, or form of forms, through which all things were created. As such he has access to the "root of eternal light" (*radius lucis aeternae*), or "seed of divinity" (*semen divinum*), which is the *Verbum Dei* itself. However, this *lux nobilissima*, which is "angelic, or intellectual", can only be accessed through faith. Similar to Sermon 124, where faith was said to "arouse" the intellect, here Cusanus also describes faith as a necessary impetus, which "actualizes" the latent "intellectual light" in man, so that he will strive to nourish it to full deiformity:

And [...] this light is obscured and cannot be in act unless it is aroused by wonder, just as a stomach does not experience hunger unless an unpleasant sensation comes first which makes the stomach crave food, etc. But Christ came, who is the end of the creature. In him that light [i.e., of the human intellect] is united intellectually to the truth and the eternal reason, so that it [i.e., the intellectual light in man] will find rest in itself through that omnipotence.<sup>15</sup>

If the lower, "corporeal light" dominates in man, then the intellectual light will remain obscured and merely potential. However, the former is not necessarily an obstacle to the latter, as it may, if used correctly, support the intellectual light and help to carry it "upwards".<sup>16</sup> The notion of the animal nature acting as a support to the intellect will be explicated further in Sermon 289, which we will see below.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4 12–14: « Et quanto res est nobilior, tanto lucidior. Et quanto lucidior, tanto in natura sua deiformior, quae est lux lucis. »

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6 13–18: « Illa intellectualis habet hoc lumen in vario gradu. Unde aliqua est in infimo gradu istius lucis intellectualis, sicut materia prima in infimo gradu lucis corporalis. Et huius iungitur ultimus gradus perfectionis lucis naturae, et est homo. »

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7 6–14: « Et ita est hoc lumen obfuscatum et non potest in actu, nisi excitetur admiratione, sicut stomachus non famescit, nisi tristis sensatio praecedat, quae facit stomachum appetere cibum etc. Sed Christus venit, qui est finis creaturae. In illo lumen illud intellectuale unitum est veritati et rationi aeternae, ut sic quiescet omnipotentia in se ipsa. »

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 8 3–10: « Nam si lux intellectualis sequitur lumen naturae animalitatis hominis, tunc dominatur concupiscentia carnis. Et secundum hoc lumen non potest pervenire ad veritatem, quae est lux lucis; ita est in tenebris. Si vero trahit lumen naturae sursum ipsum lumen intellectuale et dominatur eidem, tunc est filius lucis aeternae. »

Cusanus further specifies that man can only overcome the carnal aspects of his animal nature through a “regeneration of spirit” which is accomplished through faith:

And because he is not able, according to the first generation of the natural species, to conquer the carnal drive, another generation must follow, and it is regeneration in spirit, so that the light of nature is generated anew, so that it is made intellectual. And because this regeneration can only happen through faith—for if the regeneration must happen of the light of the species, so that it becomes intellectual [light], this must happen through faith, which precedes the intellect and thus is every teaching of Christ—if you want to attain that which you desire, believe that you can attain it and do as reason dictates, etc.<sup>17</sup>

Faith “precedes” the intellect only in the sense that the human intellect is a similitude of the *Verbum Dei*. Because the divine intellectual nature is the sum of “all the teachings of Christ”, faith actualizes the intellect latent in the spirit of man. Hence, once again, we see that faith does not precede the intellect as something opposed to it, but rather because it is the inner essence of man’s intellectual nature, that by virtue of which the intellect *is* intellectual. To believe in Christ is thus “to do as reason dictates”, just as God himself created the primordial light *in ratione*.<sup>18</sup>

#### SERMON 130: *INTRAVIT JESUS* (1453)

Sermon 130 is rather like a highly philosophical extension of Sermon 129. Taking up some of the same themes, faith is nowhere explicitly mentioned in this sermon, but is implicitly present in the identification of Jesus as the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9 7–18: « Et quia non es potens secundum primam generationem naturae speciei vincere motum carnis, oportet aliam generationem subsequi, et est regeneratio in spiritu, ita quod lumen naturae denuo generetur, ut fiat intellectuale. Et quia haec regeneratio non potest fieri nisi fide—nam si debet regeneratio fieri luminis speciei, ut fiat intellectuale, oportet, quod hoc fiat per fidem, quae praecedit intellectum unde omnis doctrina Christi est: Si vis attingere id, quod cupis, crede te attingere posse, et fac, uti ratio dicat etc. »

<sup>18</sup> Roth also points out, with reference to Sermon 129, how faith is described as something embedded in nature as a gift of grace and thus in the structure of the intellect, which as a consequence need only reflect on its nature to achieve self-perfection: “Deutlich drückt die obige Stelle aus, daß die Vernunft nur ihren eigenen Gründen und Überlegungen zu folgen braucht, um das Ziel zu erreichen. Allein, und dies macht den ganzen Unterschied aus, das Erreichen, allein schon der Gedanke seiner Möglichkeit, verdankt sich Gott. Dies hat die endliche Vernunft anzuerkennen, und gerade darin findet sie zu ihrer höchsten Vollkommenheit, entdeckt sie doch so in der endlichen Natur den Gottessohn.” Roth (2000), p. 308.

ultimate principle of the intellect. As with Sermon 129, Cusanus focuses on the notion of light, and in particular on Jesus as the “lux mundi”. Using Luke 10:38 as a springboard,<sup>19</sup> Cusanus interprets “intravit in castellum” to mean that Jesus is the light that entered the human species in order to illuminate all men.<sup>20</sup> For human reason “lacks the light of life”, i.e., is only potential, until actualized by the Word.<sup>21</sup>

Cusanus here makes use of the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* which he first delineated in *De docta ignorantia*, and adds to it a third, even higher level to explain how Jesus illuminates the “citadel” of human reason:

The rational power reasons and syllogizes, but is in shadow because it does not know whether it succeeds or not, unless the judge of reason, namely the intellect, which illuminates reason, descends, in order that [the rational power] understands whether it reasons rightly or wrongly. And thus reason does not have that light in itself, but this enters from the intellect. [...] However the intellect is in shadow, because although it judges between reasons, nevertheless it does not know what it is that judges. For it judges this to be true, and that to be good, that to be just, etc., but does not know what true is, what just is, etc. Therefore just as the eye judges regarding colours by means of reason, and reason judges that syllogism to conclude [in a certain way] by means of the intellect, so the intellect judges this to be just by means of a certain other light, because it discerns that it is not itself that justice, by means of which it judges [...]. And so it discerns in its darkness this light of justice to enter into it, through which it is illuminated, so that it can judge.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Luke 10:38: « Factum est autem dum irent et ipse intravit in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam Martha nomine excepit illum in domum suam. »

<sup>20</sup> h *Sermo* 130, 2 5–7: « Jesus, id est lux, intravit in castellum, id est speciem humanam. Nam ipse est lux illuminans omnem hominem. »

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 7–10: « Castellum igitur significant humanam rationalem speciem, quae adhuc caret lumine vitae. Et non potest lumen vitae habere, nisi intret descendendo de sole iustitiae. »

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 12–17, 13–38: « Vis rationalis discurrit et syllogizat, sed est in umbra, quia nescit, an attingat vel non, nisi descendat iudex rationum, scilicet intellectus, qui illuminat rationem, ut intellegat se recte vel oblique discurrere. Et ita ratio in se non habet lumen illud, sed intrat ab intellectu. [...] Intellectus autem in umbra est, quia etsi iudicat inter rationes, tamen nescit, quid hoc est, quod iudicat. Iudicat enim hoc esse verum et hoc esse bonum, hoc esse iustum etc., sed nescit quid verum, quid iustum etc. Sicut igitur oculus iudicat de coloribus mediante ratione, et ratio iudicat syllogismum illum concludere mediante intellectu, et intellectus iudicat hoc esse iustum mediante aliquo alio lumine, quia deprehendit se non esse illam iustitiam, per quam iudicat. Non enim posset se ipsum ignorare. Ignorat autem id, mediante quo iudicat [...]. Et ita deprehendit in sua tenebra hoc lumen iustitiae in ipsum intrasse, per quod illuminatur, ut iudicet. »

Human reason judges this and that to be true, by virtue of a notion of truth which resides in the human intellect. However the truth by virtue of which the intellect reasons is not truth *per se*, but is rather an *image* of truth:

This light of the life of the intellectual nature, which is superintellectual and divine, enters the citadel of human nature, and is called Jesus. [...] For when the human intellect, which is an image, is so united with the light of truth, through which it judges, and is not ignorant of that which illuminates it, or feeds it, or gives it life [...], then it intuitively knows itself and all things. [...] For an image does not see itself unless in the truth whose image it is, nor can it see itself in the truth unless it sees the truth. And because the truth is the exemplar of everything, the intellect sees everything by seeing itself in the truth.<sup>23</sup>

True knowledge is not possessed until the intellect attains self-knowledge, which consists in a vision of its “superintellectual” source, that exemplar of which it is an image. Therefore reason, which operates according to a presupposition of truth, yet falls short of true knowledge—not because it is incorrect, but because it is incomplete; since one who reasons in this manner does not possess the truth in the fullest sense. This “superintellectual” vision is also man’s greatest happiness, since it is the fulfillment of his intellectual nature.<sup>24</sup> Not only is it man’s greatest happiness, but in fact his *only* rest. For the fact that human nature is fundamentally intellectual entails that no man can find peace until he has attained, intellectually, the source of his essential being. This drive to seek the source is furthermore a feature exclusive to intellectual nature:

The eye delights in seeing, and [yet] does not have enough light to move it to know what it is that delights it so much that it would see; but seeks only to the extent that it would be delighted. It does not seek *what* it is that delights it. So it is regarding all the senses. Only the intellect has so much light that it does not rest until it understands the cause of [its] delight. And therefore “because it is” is not good enough, as it is for the eye and the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6 1–4, 19–26, 27–33: « Hoc lumen vitae intellectualis naturae, quod est superintellectuale et divinum, intravit in castellum humanae naturae, et vocatur Jesus. [...] Quando enim intellectus humanus, qui est imago, sic unitur lumine veritatis, per quod iudicat, et non est ignorans, quid hoc sit, quod ipsum illuminat aut pascit aut vivificet [...]. [...] Imago enim non videt se nisi in veritate, cuius est imago, neque potest se videre in veritate, nisi se videat veritatem. Et quia veritas est exemplar omnium, omnia videt intellectus se ipsum videndo in veritate » (re. Eckhart, *Predigt* 2; see above n. 86).

<sup>24</sup> In *Sermo* 130, 7 6–10: « Non potest igitur intellectus ad summam felicitatem pervenire, nisi perveniat ad apprehensionem vitae suae seu luminis divini, cuius gerit similitudinem et radium in se. »

senses, and it desires the “for the sake of which”, and unless it attains the “for the sake of which” intellectually, does not have the life which is understanding or knowing.<sup>25</sup>

The intellect is thus uniquely driven to understand itself and to grasp the nature of its origin, that for the sake of which it is driven to act. And it must moreover grasp this *intellectualiter*—as opposed to affectively, for example.

However, because the nature of the light which the intellect seeks is “superdivine” (*superdivinus*), the “for the sake of which” is incomprehensible.<sup>26</sup> For this reason the light, which we understand objectively to be truth (*veritas*), cannot be grasped *per se*, or absolutely, but must be attained *in lumine Jesu*.<sup>27</sup> Cusanus then makes some rare remarks on the role of grace in this process:

And note, how in the light of Jesus we attain that light of glory. For the intellect does not attain that light through Jesus unless by means of the supreme hypostatic union which is the plenitude of grace. So no one can attain [it] through Christ unless through the grace of union with the spirit of Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

However, no sooner does he stress the reliance of the intellect upon grace, than he explains that this grace is immanent to human nature:

But this divine light was actually united through Jesus to the intellectual human nature, just as though the light of the art of all arts were united to the intellect in the manner of generation, such that it would know all things from the beginning, and would have been such an art that it could not be greater, since it is the art of the omnipotent creator, so that the human

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7 10–23: «Oculus delectatur in visu et non habet tantum luminis, quod moveatur ad sciendum, quid hoc sit, quod ipsum delectat tantum, ut videat. Sed tantum quaerit, ut delectetur. Non quareit, quid sit, quod delectat. Sic de omnibus sensibus. Solus autem intellectus habet tantum luminis, quod non quietatur, nisi intellegat causam delectationis. Et ergo <quia est> non sufficit ei sicut oculo et sensibus, sed <propter quid> desiderat, et nisi <propter quid> attingat intellectualiter, non habet vitam, quae est intellegere seu scire.»

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7 24–28: «Et <propter quid> est lumen superdivinum, in quo solum quiescere potest, licet omni intellectui humano Deus, uti est, maneat incomprehensibilis, quia maior quam omnis intellectus.»

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7 30–34; 8 1–2: «Veritas enim est objectum intellectus. Et in hoc quietatur intellectus, quia attingit objectum, scilicet veritatem. Unde veritas non est Deus, uti est. Nam tunc est ineffabilis. [...] Et nota, quo modo in lumine Jesu attingimus lumen illud gloriae.»

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 8 1–7: «Et nota, quo modo in lumine Jesu attingimus lumen illud gloriae. Nam intellectus Jesu non attingit hoc lumen nisi per supremam unionem hypostaticam, quae est plenitudo gratiae. Sic nullus attingere potest post Christum nisi per gratiam unionis cum spiritu Jesu.»



intellect through union with this light was posited through the most perfect act himself and will see and possess his life immortally.<sup>29</sup>

This light is united to human nature by a “superbenediction” and is inherent to the mind of every human. By this act of grace, the human mind was created as an image of the *Verbum Dei*, whereby it possesses from birth knowledge of everything in the universe, in the sense that the mind is an image of the divine Form of the form of all things. Thus, this grace is something always already given, which no intellect lacks, although until the intellect actively seeks its own source, the truth given through this grace will remain potential or imperfect. Faith is also, at least partially, subsumed within the intellect on this model, as the latter is the very image of the Word; for anyone, insofar as he has a mind, cannot ever be without faith. As with the truth bestowed by grace, this faith is indeed unformed until actively pursued in the manner described above. However faith is nonetheless only pursued and grasped by the intellect, *intellectualiter*. In other words, the perfection of faith is a wholly intellectual affair.<sup>30</sup>

#### SERMON 133: *EGO SI EXALTATUS FUERE* (1453)

From September 1453, this sermon reiterates a theme we saw emphasized in *De visione Dei*, namely, that of the mortification of the intellect for the sake of elevating it to divine wisdom. Cusanus writes of this *via*

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8 9–18: «Sed hoc lumen divinum in Jesu naturae intellectuali humanae fuit actu unitum, sicut si lumen artis omnium artium esset unitum intellectui modo geniti, ut scilicet ille ab initio esset sciens omnia, et quod haec ars tanta foret, quod non posset esse maior, ut est ars omnipotentis creatoris, ita quod intellectus humanus per unionem ad hoc lumen positus est in actu perfectissimo se et omnia intuendi et vitam suam immortaliter possidendi.»

<sup>30</sup> Also notable in this account is how Cusanus’ interest in the Incarnation is exclusively focused on how it united the “divine light [...] to the intellectual human nature”. Here as elsewhere, his preoccupation with the Incarnation is entirely abstract, as it is not the actual physical incarnation of the divine in Jesus which interests him, but the intellectual incarnation of man through the act of fusing the divine with the human natures. Roth also acknowledges this to some extent. Roth (2000), p. 297: “Im Zentrum des Cusanischen Glaubens steht das Bekenntnis, daß im Menschen Jesus der Sohn Gottes in dieser Welt erschienen ist. Durch ihn wird der Welt ihre Erfüllung und ihr letztes Ziel geschenkt. Ob Gott überhaupt Mensch wird, steht für Cusanus an vielen Stellen in seinem Werk außer Frage. Da aber alle Erkenntnis von Jesus Christus ausgeht, der die mit der unendlichen Wahrheit vereinte endliche Vernunft ist, basiert auch die Einsicht in sein Kommen, vor allem die in die Wirklichkeit der Menschwerdung, letztlich auf ihm und ist insofern ein gegebenes Wissen.”

the crucifixion,<sup>31</sup> explaining how “That lifting up is a humiliation, and the humiliation a lifting up [...]”.<sup>32</sup> He also returns to the themes of light and darkness as metaphors for knowledge and ignorance, writing:

Behold, that he [i.e., Jesus] calls darkness ignorance! Thus he who does not believe will be condemned, because the understanding is in darkness. [...] For the intellect is ever moving, because it has a lively nature, and unless it follows the light of faith, it remains in darkness, because it does not know whither it goes. And this is its death, just as if an eye is open in the darkness, so long as it is the enjoyment of sensible life, it is dead; for it does not see. However Jesus declares that he is the light, and faith is the light of light, and that through faith is attained the sonship or inheritance of the light, which the intellect seeks in its wandering, and says: While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may be the children of light.<sup>33</sup>

The intellect is always moving, always seeking, according to Cusanus, because it is its nature to understand, and so to seek knowledge. Thus it is essential that it move in the right direction, lest it fall into error. By following the light of faith it is guided towards its principle, or origin, in the Word, and in this sense fulfills itself as a “child of the light”. It is clear from this passage that, to Cusanus, there is no option but for man to seek knowledge: he is by nature an intellectual wanderer; the only question being whether he walks towards the light of wisdom, or into the darkness of confusion.

In this connection we can further understand Cusanus’ position with respect to affective theology, and his warning to Aindorffer about the perils of trying to seek divine wisdom without the aid of reason: The affective disciple labours under the illusion that one can leave the understanding behind, as it were, and strive for God on the basis of pure feeling or desire. In so doing, he mistakes the true super-visibility of God for the blindness of “an eye open in the darkness”, which is merely a failure of sensory vision. And because it is not possible to abandon the intellect, the affective disciple (as Cusanus suggested was the case with Aggsbach) would

<sup>31</sup> Re. John 12:32 « Et ego si exaltatus fuero a terra omnia traham ad me ipsum. »

<sup>32</sup> h *Sermo* 133, 2 2–4: « Illa exaltatio est humiliatio, humiliatio est exaltatio etc. »

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 3–19: « Ecce, quod tenebras dicit ignorantiam! Unde qui non credit, condemnabitur, quia comprehensus est in tenebris. [...] Intellectus enim est semper ambulans, quia habet vivacem naturam, et nisi lumen habeat fidei, quod sequatur, manet in tenebris, quia nescit, quo vadit, et haec est mors eius, sicut si oculus est apertus in tenebris quoad delectationem vitae sensibilis, mortuus est; non enim videt. Declarat autem Jesus se lucem et lumen lucis esse fidem, et per fidem attingi filiationem lucis seu hereditatem, quam intellectus ambulando quaerit, et dicit: ‘Dum lucem habetis, credite in lucem, ut filii lucis sitis’ [John 12:36]. »

not learn to transcend the realm of sensible images, and thus inadvertently succumb to idol worship.

SERMON 134: *CREDIDIT IPSE* (1453)

Shortly thereafter, in a sermon from Oct. 28 of the same year, « *Credidit ipse* », we find an interesting account wherein Cusanus claims that faith *coincides* with infidelity:

And Christ says: 'Unless you will have seen [the] signs and wonders, you will not believe'. Paul says that the Jews sought signs, and the Greeks wisdom or reason. See, that this is coincidence! For signs only occur through faith. For he says: if you can believe, etc. And so the infidelity of seeking signs can only be taken away through faith. For he who seeks to see signs in order to believe, cannot reach [those] signs unless he believes. Therefore infidelity coincides with faith seeking to see signs in order to believe.<sup>34</sup>

His intention here is to demonstrate the inevitability of faith, insofar as this is the intelligibility, or Word, of all sensible signs. For, as he goes on to explain, "[...] it is the Word through which is every power of heaven, out of which power all plants and whatever sensible things have their particular power [...]"<sup>35</sup> Thus here we see Cusanus once again discussing faith, not as something opposed to reason, i.e., to the rational knowledge which is based on sensible images or signs, but as that which enables reason to function. This represents another attempt to articulate a means for conversion: rather than trying to persuade the infidel to take a leap of faith, Cusanus argues here that anyone seeking reasons to believe is already a believer; as such, conversion to the Faith entails merely a recognition of something already present.

---

<sup>34</sup> h *Sermo* 134, 3 1–12: « Item Christus dicit: «Nisi signa et prodigia videritis, non credetis». Paulus dicit, quod Iudaei quaerunt signa, Graeci sapientiam seu rationem. Vide, quod hic est coincidentia! Nam signa non nisi fide fiunt. Dicit enim: Si potestis credere etc. Et sic infidelitas signa quaerentium non potest tolli nisi per fidem. Qui enim quaerit videre signa, ut credat, non perveniet ad signa, nisi credat. Coincidit igitur infidelitas cum fide inquirenti videre signum, ut credat. »

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4 20–23: « [...] Verbum, per quod est omnis virtus caelorum, ex qua virtute omnis herba et quaelibet sensibilia habent particularem virtutem suam [...]. »

SERMON 135: *GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE* (1453)

The discussion of faith found in Sermon 135 corresponds strongly with Cusanus' structural notion of faith as the *vis iudiciaria*, as expressed in *Idiota de mente*. Here faith is described as being both the 'locus' of and 'capacity' for wisdom:

[...] note how the inward man is the locus of the spirit of life, which is the capacity of faith and of wisdom, just as the outward man has the earth as [his] material, and his sensible soul is the capacity of that rational spirit of life. The sensible soul is not the material out of which it is created, but is rather like the locus of its capacity. As such the spirit of life is rather like the locus of the capacity of faith, and faith is the locus of wisdom. Wisdom presupposes faith, just as Isaiah says: Unless you believe, you will not understand.<sup>36</sup>

Reason depends on knowledge derived from the senses, and thus pertains to the sensible soul and the "outward man". Faith and wisdom, on the other hand, pertain to the "inward man", meaning his immaterial, intellectual nature. Wisdom presupposes faith in the sense that it is located in faith, which is another way of saying that faith is the structure, or faculty, of wisdom.

Although faith resides thus in the "inward man", nevertheless most men are ignorant of this. They require "signs and wonders" (Deut. 26:8), i.e., sensible images, before they will believe. Therefore the Word was made flesh, in order than man might see and hear of the miracles of Christ, that through these sensible experiences their rational capacity be led inward to the wisdom of faith:

So the Word was made flesh, in order that it could be approached and heard, and men could be led from the darkness of ignorance towards faith. And the mode of being pulled to faith is: to make visible to man those miracles which are beyond man. Hence Christ did this, so that by [man] having received faith, he [i.e., Christ] could plant wisdom.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> h *Sermo* 135, 6 9–18: « Et nota, quo modo interior homo habet pro loco spiritum vitae, qui est capax fidei et sapientiae, sicut exterior homo habet terram pro materia, et anima sensibilis eius est capax illius spiritus vitae rationalis. Non quod anima sensibilis sit materia, ex qua creetur, sed sit quasi locus capax eius. Sic spiritus vitae est quasi locus capax fidei, et fides locus sapientiae. Sapientia fidem praesupponit, ut ait Isaias: Nisi credideritis, non intellegetis. »

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7 8–14: « Sic Verbum caro factum est, ut accedi possit et audiri, et homines possint duci de tenebris ignorantiae ad fidem. Et modus trahendi ad fidem est: in conspectu hominis ea, quae super hominem sunt, facere miracula. Hinc Christus sic fecit, ut recepta fide sapientiam plantare posset. »

Man is pulled to faith, i.e., drawn inwards, by the sensible appearance of miracles, i.e., images that defy reason. This sounds very similar to the effect of contemplating an “all-seeing image” that Cusanus developed as a meditational practice in *De visione Dei*, written just shortly prior to this sermon.

Here, of course, Cusanus refers to the actual miracles performed by Christ. While those who viewed those miracles first-hand may have been drawn inwards to faith through their sensible appearance, they could only be “made visible” to subsequent generations of men in the form of scriptural accounts. In this connection, Cusanus takes it as given that one who reads of these miracles will accept, on the authority of Scripture, that they really occurred; however this sort of credulity does not appear to form a part of his notion of faith. It rather seems that he considers this to be a simple matter of giving one’s assent to an account presented by reliable witnesses, and therefore more of an informed decision based on sound evidence than an act of faith. In fact, he seldom refers to the miracles, and when he does, they are brought forth as empirical evidence of Christ’s divinity rather than as something requiring credulity.<sup>38</sup>

In this sermon, we have a rare case of Cusanus talking about the contents of Scripture in relation to faith. As in the previous sermon, faith is described as the sensible impetus which provokes the faith inherent to the mind to actively turn towards itself, “jump-starting” the *vis iudiciaria* in the mind, so to speak. In addition, the purpose of the Incarnation is described here as being primarily this. The contents of Scripture function in same way as the physical universe: as sensible information that can guide one to the inner, intellectual structure of things. However, as said above, this is more like an act of recognition than of belief. According to Cusanus, the events described in Scripture, as well as the original occurrence of the miracles themselves, are only effective because they trigger a certain response from the mind, a response based on the intuitive recognition of similarity between the contents of Scripture and the mind’s own structure.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> However, to the extent that assent to the accounts of miracles presented in Scripture would certainly represent “second-hand” knowledge, it is noteworthy that Cusanus speaks little of them in relation to faith. The experiential, first-hand emphasis of his theology is much more compatible with the notion of faith as an inherent capacity or *vis iudiciaria*.

<sup>39</sup> Roth rightly points out that the authority of Scripture, as of the Church, is said by Cusanus to follow from the authority of faith in Jesus Christ. Since this is said to be embedded in the structure of nature and the intellect, such authority is not without “ground” in Cusanus, and consequently represents no flight into fideism (Roth [2000], p. 301). Watts

SERMON 143: *NUNC DIMITTIS* (1454)

Cusanus writes in the sermon «*Nunc dimittis*» from early 1454, that “Christ is the end of all things, and when one is turned to him, the mind is quieted of all things”, due to the fact that Christ is the form, or principle of intelligibility itself.<sup>40</sup> The mind occupied only with Christ is quietened of all things, because it attends to nothing other than its own structure. Cusanus then pushes this even further to assert that Christ, the “light of the people” (*lumen gentium*), is also the “light of rational science” (*lumen scientiae rationalis*). And because Christ is also the Faith, he is at the same time the “light of divine science” (*lumen scientiae divinalis*).<sup>41</sup> Here we see again the same faith-reason dialectic utilized in *Idiota de mente*, whereby faith plays the dual role of being the principle of human and divine knowledge. Faith functions as man’s link to the divine, insofar as it is embedded in the structure of the human mind, but also assures the truth of man’s rational judgments, since these spring from a divine intellectual principle. Thus Cusanus goes on to say: “And this light is seen by the eye of the intellect, and in it are seen all lights, because it is the beginning, middle, and end of every rational light”. Christ is perceived not with the rational but with the intellectual eye, which means with faith, which as the higher principle and structure of the mind illuminates the divine realm above and the human realm below, being the source and truth of every “rational light”.<sup>42</sup>

SERMON 148: *MISERERE MEI FILI DAVID* (1454)

Dated March 17, 1454—a day before Cusanus’ letter to Bernard of Waging, in which the Cardinal responded to Bernard’s doubts about the program laid out in *De visione Dei* and reiterated his defense of intellective mystical theology against an affective approach such as that advocated by

---

wrongly interprets Cusanus’ account of faith as reflecting “the fideism of nominalists such as Gabriel Biel” (Moffitt Watts [1982], p. 228.) The authority of the Gospel and of the Church are always rationally supportable, to Cusanus, since they flow directly from the divine Logos.

<sup>40</sup> h *Sermo* 143, 1 1–3: «Notandum, quod omnium finis Christus, et quando ad eum pertingitur, tunc omnis mens quiescit.»

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2 6–8: «Nam lumen gentium est lumen scientiae rationalis. Lumen autem Christi est lumen scientiae divinalis.»

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2 8–11: «Et hoc lumen videtur oculo intellectus, et in eo videntur omnia lumina, quia principium, medium et finis omnis rationalis luminis.»

Aggsbach—the lengthy sermon «*Miserere mei fili David*» discusses faith in relation to the will and love. Due to its unusual emphasis on *caritas*, the discussion of faith is rather different than that found in Sermon 143, for example; however, if anything, the increased focus on the topic of love only serves to highlight his highly intellectual interpretation thereof.

The sermon takes as its starting point Matthew 15:22: “And behold a woman of Canaan who came out of those coasts, crying out, said to him: Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David: my daughter is grievously troubled by a devil”,<sup>43</sup> which Cusanus proceeds to interpret in the following way:

However that woman who is called a Canaanite, as the mother of a daughter vexed by a devil, is like reason, who is the mother of a daughter who is the sensible power [...].<sup>44</sup>

Because the woman/reason was distressed by the “vexation” represented by her daughter, namely, the vexation of a soul dominated by the senses, she sought the help of Jesus. The “vexation” of the daughter is moreover interpreted as the necessary opposition by which the intellect is stimulated to seek God; for “unless it were infirm, it would not seek medicine”.<sup>45</sup> Such adversity is thus beneficial to man, as it provides the ‘motion’ he requires.<sup>46</sup> In the same way Cusanus emphasizes the importance of Jesus’ initial refusal to help the woman as representative of the necessary mortification of reason, which both humbles reason and strengthens faith.<sup>47</sup>

This interpretation of the demonic “vexation” of the girl goes hand in hand with Cusanus’ view of sin, which “is a motion in the rational soul receding from wisdom”.<sup>48</sup> According to Cusanus, “all sinning is ignorance”.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Matt. 15:22: «Et ecce mulier chananea a finibus illis egressa clamavit dicens ei miserere mei Domine Fili David filia mea male a daemonio vexatur.»

<sup>44</sup> h *Sermo* 148, 3 16–19: «Mulier autem illa, quae hic vocatur Chananaea, est ut mater filiae vexatae a daemonio quasi ratio, quae est mater filiae, quae est vis sensitiva [...].»

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5 5–7: «Vexatio enim dat intellectum. Et nisi esset infirmitas, non quaereretur medicus. Ideo permittit Deus, ut vexemur, ut sic quaeratur.»

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5 7–10: «Adversitas est homini utilis, et quem Deus ad se vocat, permittit cadere in talem indigentiam, ut excitetur ad motum.»

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10 1–18.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6 1: «Motus [...] in anima rationali recedendo a sapientia [...].»

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 6 3–4: «Omnis peccans est ignorans.» And conversely, Cusanus later states: «Quod corrumpit intellegere, est peccatum» (ibid., 8 20). Euler attempts to show that Cusanus has a genuine concern for soteriology and does not overlook the problem of sin, despite his highly intellectual conception thereof, in Euler, W. “Does Nicholas of Cusa have a Theology of the Cross?” in *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), 405–420. O’Malley too regards Cusanus’ soteriology as “sapiential” and notes that to Cusanus, Christ is above all a teacher, and that even his death on the cross is interpreted as an act “testifying to the truth”



That gift of the Holy Spirit by means of which our animal soul is united to the truth, according to Cusanus, is *caritas*.<sup>50</sup> And when someone acts or speaks in a way contrary to *caritas*, then one moves in error and “recedes from the truth of order and the eternal law”.<sup>51</sup> A little further on Cusanus adds “Likewise any creature whatever is ordered for the sake of an operation [...]. The operation of man is to understand the truth and to love the good. That which corrupts the understanding is sin.”<sup>52</sup>

Grace is also briefly mentioned. Faith relies on the influx of grace to support and augment itself, “For faith cannot be augmented unless through such support [of grace], since human reason is so small that it could not achieve [this]”.<sup>53</sup> Cusanus notably speaks of faith and reason in this sentence as though they go hand in hand. Reason is not opposed to faith, but alone is not sufficient to support it. An influx of grace is thus required; however we know from previous discussions that this grace was infused into human nature at its creation. Significantly, Cusanus later describes faith as “the concept of the Savior in the soul”.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, when this concept is strong, it is like “a fire consuming all imperfections and illuminating all darkness and perfecting every power and actuating every potency”.<sup>55</sup>

---

(Jn. 18:37) rather than as expiation for sin: “Redemption is a revelation and an enlightenment. Christ is the teacher, and the Church is his school. The preacher’s task, in imitation of Christ, is to help reveal the revelation, delving ever more deeply into the profound secrets it contains. If Cusa’s preaching has an analogue in early Christian writings, that analogue could be some form of *didache*. i.e., a form of instruction. A correspondence between what Cusa thought Redemption to be and the literary forms in which he discussed that Redemption is certainly discernable. Discourse and dialogue, question and answer, speculation and ‘revelation’—these are all appropriate to the teacher, to the man who wishes to impart his wisdom.” O’Malley, J. *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1979, pp. 97, 143.

<sup>50</sup> h *Sermo* 148, 6 33–34: «Donum autem illud, mediante quo anima nostra unitur veritati, est amor, qui dicitur caritas.»

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7 4–5: «[...] recedit a veritate ordinis et lege aeterna [...].»

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8 17–20: «Item quaelibet creatura ordinatur ad operationem [...]. Operatio hominis est intellegere veritatem et amare bonitatem. Quod corrumpit intellegere, est peccatum.» Moffitt Watts misattributes to Cusanus a “fideistic soteriology”, not recognizing that to Cusanus sin is fundamentally an error of understanding (Moffitt Watts, [1982], p. 229).

<sup>53</sup> h *Sermo* 148, 9 32–36: «Nam fides efficitur magna ex influx divinae gratiae, qui influxus est adiutorium. Fides enim non nisi tali adiutorio augeri potest, cum ratio humana sit adeo parva, quod ad ipsam pertinere nequeat.»

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 10 33–34: «Mira res est fides, quae sanat et iustificat spiritum. Nam est conceptus Salvatoris in anima.»

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 10 34–38: «Quando igitur fortis est talis conceptus et magnus, est sicut ignis consumens omnem maculam et illuminans omnes tenebras et perficiens omnes vires et actuans omnem potentiam.»

Only in this is true Christiformity achieved, which is the goal of faith, and entails a voluntary transformation of the soul that can only be achieved through love:

Consider, that unless the soul will have reached such a faith that everything yields to its will, it is not Christiform nor is it capable of the sonship of God. Likewise attend, that inasmuch as the soul desires something other than its life, which is God, it does not reach that great faith. Whereby Paul said that to move mountains through faith is not to have the faith about which Christ speaks; rather a faith formed by love is required. For love is the life, etc. Thus without it the soul is as dead as the ringing of brass [cf. 1 Cor 13:1]. For even though the ringing seems to be something to the ears, to the intellect, which respects the words underlying the sound, it is nothing, since the ringing is not a significative sound. Thus the evil spirit of Satan, the adversary of unity and of love, or of demons, dominates that faith which is without love of God, out of which result idolatry, incantations, magic, etc.<sup>56</sup>

Cusanus' explanation of this statement reveals immediately that the importance he attributes to love has little to do with affect or feeling. For what the ringing—which here represents the sensible or outer form of faith—lacks, is *signification*. It is empty because it is cut off from the inner or latent word which pertains to the intellect, whereby it acquires meaning. Thus according to Cusanus' account in this sermon, love is important to faith precisely insofar as it pertains to intellect. This accords with the strongly intellective interpretation of love in his letters written around the same time, wherein love was subsumed within the understanding as the intellect's striving towards its object of knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

It is also in this way that Cusanus' remark that faith divorced from love will easily fall prey to idolatry and superstition must be understood. This passage hearkens back to the letter in which Cusanus admonished Vincent for denying the role of the intellect in mystical theology, explaining the dangers inherent to any form of devotion that seeks God through affect alone. There he emphasized that, because a lover can only rise to union

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 11 7–15: « Quare Paulus dicit, quod transferre montes per fidem non sit habere fidem, de qua hic loquitur Christus; sed requiritur fides formata caritate. Caritas enim est vita etc. Unde anima sine illa est mortua tamquam aes tinniens. Tinnitus enim, etiam licet auribus aliquid videatur esse, tamen intellectui, qui ad verbum sub voce latens respicit, nihil est, cum tinnitus non sit vox significativa. Unde malignus spiritus Satan sive daemonium, adversarius unitatis et caritatis, dominatur fidei illi, quae est sine caritate Dei, ex qua idolatria, incantationes, praestigia etc. eveniunt. »

<sup>57</sup> Specifically in Cusanus' letter to Aindorffer, February 12, 1454 (Vansteenbergh [1915], pp. 122–123); discussed above, in section "Reception of Cusanus' works in the monasteries, and the development of the debate".

with his beloved on the basis of some knowledge of the latter, a disciple who tries to seek God purely through affect will unknowingly create an image for himself and, deceived by “the angel of Satan”, would think he had found God when he had only found some image or idol.<sup>58</sup> The love of which Cusanus speaks here, however, is a very different sort love, one which pertains to the intellect, which is the latent Word or Christ, and only in reference to which can love be certain it strives for God himself, and thus in true faith. It is evident from passages such as the above that Cusanus considers love of great importance to theology and to Christian worship; however, like his interpretation of faith, his view of love is thoroughly intellectual.

SERMON 189: *QUI MANDUCAT HUNC PANEM VIVET IN AETERNUM* (1455)

Probably no other of Cusanus' writings manifests so strongly the deep intellectualism of his theology as Sermon 189, a lengthy meditation on the nature of wisdom. Written approximately two years after his participation in the Tegernsee debate, it is clear that his position on the role of the intellect in mystical theology has not softened in any way. Eternal wisdom is entirely intellectual in nature, and the intellect, accordingly, is the noblest of all human powers:

The intellectual nature does not live unless it has wisdom. The intellect which is that wisdom is living infinite life. [...] Wisdom [...] bestows immortality, which you can thus pursue in the similitude of vision, for the eye of the intellect is to sensibility as truth is to similitude. No sense is nobler than vision, just as no power is nobler than the intellect. [...] And just as light descends by grace to vision from the font of sensible light, namely from the sun, so does wisdom from the creator of the sun. [...] Just as vision is inwardly without actual life and cannot fulfil itself nor likewise have being without sensible light, so the intellect cannot have actual life nor taste life, because it cannot live to understand without its actual life which is understanding, in the absence of the spiritual or intellectual light. Wisdom is the light of truth. Just as the visible is not seen without light, neither is the truth [seen] by the intellect without wisdom.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Namely, Cusanus' letter to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 113–117; discussed above, in section “Reception of Cusanus' works in the monasteries, and the development of the debate”.

<sup>59</sup> In *Sermo* 189, 1 14–16; 2 1–4, 16–18, 19–27: «Intellectualis natura non vivit, nisi habeat sapientiam. Intellectus qui est ipsa sapientia est vivens vita infinita. [...] Sapientia [...] praestat immortalitatem, quod in similitudine visus ita venari poteris; nam oculus

Wisdom thus refers to the Word, and is that *lumen divinum* referred to in Sermon 130, of which the human intellect is an image and which therefore provides the intellectual principle of all reason. Wisdom must be ever-present in the intellect in order for the latter to act: just as the eye requires light from the sun. Thus the intellect was not only formed in wisdom, but must receive a constant influx of this grace in order to be intellect *in actu*. This reiterates a notion we saw in Sermon 148, where it was explained that the human intellect is but a potency without the higher light.

Correspondingly, infidelity is intellectual blindness. Those who have never had the Christian faith lack the light which would actualize their intellectual capacity and, just as men who have been blind from birth, do not know what they are missing by not having this light of truth:

The Christian faith is as vision in the soul. [...] Infidelity is as blindness in the soul. Thus the gentile without actual sin does not experience as much as the Christian sinner; for he does not have vision, but is as one born blind, who does not experience a hunger for visual experience, which he has never had as the Christian has.<sup>60</sup>

Even sinners are closer to wisdom than gentiles, since they have at least once tasted faith, and thus know what they are missing; for “he who has tasted wisdom in the intellect knows it to surpass everything which can be understood and understands it to be the supreme source of delight and immortal life of the intellect”.<sup>61</sup> Wisdom is in fact so delightful to the intellect that life without it is not worth living, according to Cusanus.<sup>62</sup>

---

intellectualis se habet ad sensibilem sicut veritas ad similitudinem. [...] Et sicut lux grata visui descendit a fonte sensibilis lucis, scilicet sole, sic sapientia a creatore solis. [...] Sicut visus est penitus sine actu vitae et non potest attingere se nec etiam habere esse sine luce sensibili, sic intellectus non potest habere actum vitae neque gustare vitam, quia se vivere intelligere nequit sine actu vitae suae, qui est intelligere, absque luce spirituali seu intellectuali. Sapientia lux est veritatis. Sicut visibile sine luce non videtur, sic veritas per intellectum sine sapientia.»

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3 1, 4–9: «Fides christiana in anima est sicut visus. [...] Infidelitas est sicut caecitas in anima. Unde gentilis sine peccato actuali non tantum patitur sicut christianus peccator; ipse enim non habet visum, sed est ut caecus natus, qui non patitur esuriam in visu, quem numquam habuit, sicut christianus.»

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 3 16–20: «Sic qui degustavit sapientiam in intellectu scit eam omnia quae intelligi possunt superare et intelligere eam esse supremam delectationem et immortalem vitam intellectui.»

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 8 13–18: «Et si quis mihi diceret, an potius vellem non vivere quam vivere vita illa qua vivunt irrationalia animalia, eligerem citius non vivere. Nam talis vita non est rationalis spiritus vita; ideo non capit eam esse veram vitam, quae sine ratione est.» This hearkens back to Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, where Cusanus described the intellect’s deprivation of truth as the ultimate human torment, worse than the fires of hell.

Wisdom is the life of the intellect. Because human being is essentially intellectual being, not to have wisdom is more than just ignorance, to Cusanus—it really is a kind of death. Just as the body requires the continual sustenance of food, so therefore does the intellect require the nourishment of wisdom in order to live.<sup>63</sup>

Cusanus then explains how this wisdom is related to faith. Faith is wisdom in *potency*:

For faith is an enigmatic vision of the vision which is in truth and of the face [i.e., of God]. [...] For faith is potential, vision is actual. Faith regards this world, act regards the future [world], and it will not be discovered in act unless it was in potency. Faith is received in the soul through the word and [the soul] transforms by being made an intellectual soul, to be carried from death to life. The death of the intellect is ignorance, because its life is understanding. For just as the word of wisdom, when it enters the intellect, makes the intellect transform from ignorance to wisdom, from death to life, and destroys ignorance, neither does the intellect live unless wisdom is communicated through the word of wisdom.<sup>64</sup>

Here again it emerges that the act of faith (i.e., the act of believing in Christ) is inferior to a vision of wisdom, to the extent that it is only *potential* wisdom. As potential wisdom, faith is logically prior to vision; yet the fact that it is potential entails that it is incomplete, or *informata*. Wisdom, therefore, is grasped by faith only enigmatically, or without understanding. However the act of receiving the faith also transforms the soul into an intellectual soul, and thus prepares it for the act of intellectual vision. As he later says, faith prepares the capacity of the spirit for receiving the spirit of God.<sup>65</sup> Faith is thus not akin to ignorance, as it is the seed from which germinates the intellectual capacity. Thus faith is also potential in the sense of being seminal wisdom.

<sup>63</sup> h *Sermo* 189, 9 1–6: «Sed quid reficit rationalem vitam nisi cibus intellectualis, qui est sapientia immarcescibilis, quae est verbum illud, quod meum spiritum vocavit ad esse? Verbum igitur illud est ratio infinita, quae meum rationem de nihilo ad esse rationis vocavit.»

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7 7–9, 18–30: «Nam fides est visio aenigmatica visionis, quae est in veritate et facialis. [...] Nam fides est potentia, visio est actus. Fides est de hoc mundo, actus de futuro, et non reperietur in actu, nisi quod fuit in potentia. Fides per verbum recipitur in anima et transfert faciendo animam intellectivam transire de morte ad vitam. Mors intellectus est ignorantia, quia eius vivere est intelligere. Sicut enim verbum sapientiae, quando subintrat intellectum, facit intellectum transire de ignorantia ad sapientiam, de morte ad vitam, et interficit ignorantiam, ut non vivat intellectu nisi sapientia per verbum sapientis communicata [...].»

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 13 23–24: «[...] fides praeparat capacitatem spiritus nostri ad receptionem spiritus Dei.»

Cusanus returns to the notion of faith as “potential wisdom” later in the sermon, describing it in terms of “hearing” and “seeing”:

Consider how God bestowed our intellectual nature in a twofold way, namely to be able to hear about his glory and to be able to see it. To be able to hear about his glory is appropriate for us, as we are inhabitants of this world, where darkness reigns and we are as far from God as the heaven is distant from the earth, in a region remote from the glorious kingdom of light and truth. That it is possible to see is [also] appropriate to us, as we are approaching and crossing over from earth to heaven, or from this world into that kingdom of glory.<sup>66</sup>

Human nature is a dual nature: in part sensible and turned towards creation, and in part intellectual and turned towards our divine origin; thus we require a twofold way for knowing God. As in the previous passage, Cusanus relates faith to this world and to the sensible aspect of our nature. To hear about God is appropriate to our sensible nature in that hearing relates to sensible signs, e.g. the faith as recorded in Scripture, or as related in a sermon. The seeing Cusanus speaks of here of course does not refer to sensible vision, but rather to an intellectual “vision” which transcends the sensible and rational realms.

However there is a necessary link between these two aspects of our nature. For just as we cannot have *in actu* what we did not already possess *in potentia*, God could not make himself known to us unless he first bestowed the capacity for belief upon us:

But because the possibility to hear about the kingdom of God is in us, so, because that which we hear is the word, therefore we can hear the word about the kingdom of the word. But because God could not speak to us about his kingdom if it were known only to him [...], therefore God gave to us the ability to believe; for unless we had the power to believe the word of God, we could not grasp the glory through hearing. Therefore without faith in the invisible glory of God nothing could be revealed to us; whereby God bestowed the ability to believe upon our intellect, so that by means of belief [man] could grasp the revelation through hearing.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 18 1–10: « Considera, quo modo Deus nostrae naturae intellectuali duo dedit, scilicet posse audire de gloria sua et posse videre eam. Posse audire de gloria sua convenit nobis, ut sumus inhabitatores huius mundi, ubi regnat tenebra et sumus longe a Deo sicut caelum a terra distantes in regione longinqua a regno gloriae lucis et veritatis. Posse videre convenit nobis, ut sumus appropinquantes et translate de terra in caelum sive de hoc mundo in regnum ipsum gloriae. »

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 18 11–24: « Sed quia posse audire de regno Dei est in nobis, tunc, quia quod audimus verbum est, igitur audire possumus de regno verbum. Sed quia non potest nisi Deus loqui nobis de suo regno solum sibi cognito [...], ideo dedit nobis Deus posse

Notably, the capacity for belief is located in the intellect. Thus even though hearing, as associated with faith, is generally opposed to reason and understanding, nevertheless faith is an essentially intellectual capacity. This reminds one of Cusanus' assertion, in the context of the Tegernsee debate, that what Vincent failed to understand is that even ignorance and the rejection of reason are intellectual operations.<sup>68</sup> In the same way, what he is asserting here is that the operations involved in faith (i.e., hearing and assent) also belong to the intellect and that the ability to believe is an inherently intellectual capacity.

Thus our sensible and intellectual natures are clearly interwoven. Accordingly, Cusanus then finds it necessary to qualify his account of faith as hearing:

It seems however that to believe is not a pure hearing or mental seeing, but below seeing and above hearing. For we do not assent to everything that we hear, nor do we see everything to which we assent. But so long as we believe what we hear, then we do not assent by vision. And note how he could not have revealed the glory to our intellectual nature, which is incapable of a vision of glory, unless through faith. Because of this any intellect, so long as it has any rational lucidity, can believe, because acute vision is not required for this, but any sort will suffice. Thus the simple are apt for believing; for they have been provided with hearing. We experience that those who are more attentive to seeing are less apt for hearing, and vice versa.<sup>69</sup>

Faith, Cusanus now explains, is neither seeing nor hearing, but lies somewhere in between. It cannot be simple hearing, for in fact we do not assent to everything that we hear; thus indicating that in faith some mental act must intervene which compels one to give assent. However this cannot yet involve an intellectual seeing, since this, according to Cusanus, is incompatible with belief: We can believe something that we hear, or

---

credere; nam nisi haberemus potestatem credendi verbo Dei, non possemus per auditum capere gloriam. Sine fide igitur de invisibili gloria Dei nihil nobis posset revelari; quare posse credere Deus dedit nostro intellectui, ut mediante credulitate per auditum capiat revelationem. »

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer, September 14, 1453 Vansteenberghes [1915], pp. 113–117.

<sup>69</sup> In *Sermo* 189, 19 12–26: « Videtur autem quod credere non sit purus auditus neque visus mentis, sed infra visum et supra auditum. Non enim assentimus omnibus quae audimus, neque omnia videmus quibus assentimus. Sed dum audita credimus, tunc non visis assentimus. Et nota, quo modo intellectuali naturae nostrae, quae incapax est visionis gloriae, non nisi per fidem revelari potuit gloria. Ob hoc omnis intellectus, si aliquid lucis rationis habet, potest credere, quia ad hoc non requiritur acutus visus, sed sufficit aliquis. Ideo simplices apti sunt ad credendum; nam habent auditum paratiorem. Experimus in nobis quod plus attenti ad videndum minus sunt apti ad audiendum, et e converso. »



know something that we see, but cannot simultaneously know and believe the same thing (just as something cannot be simultaneously potential and actual). Thus he says that faith is “above” hearing but “below” seeing.

Some sort of “rational lucidity” is therefore involved in faith, since a person must comprehend what they hear in order to determine whether or not to give assent to it. However precisely what the nature of that mental operation is, whereby one determines whether or not to assent, Cusanus does not elaborate. He merely indicates that “every disciple must first attentively listen, then having carefully listened, consider whether he could finally regard the truth in himself through having heard”.<sup>70</sup> The simple are more likely to give assent, as they are more attuned to the sensible than the intellectual side of their nature. And in this respect, Cusanus suggests that the simple actually have an advantage over the learned when it comes to wisdom.<sup>71</sup> Thus, although on the one hand the simple are more removed from intellectual being, on the other hand, because they are closer to faith, they are in a better position to actualize their intellect. And so a picture of faith emerges in Sermon 189 that is actually very similar to that in *Idiota de mente*: for just as there faith was represented as the power of judgment (*vis iudiciaria*), or structure of the intellect, here faith is presented as the intellect *in potentia*.

SERMON 193: *RELICTIS OMNIBUS SECUTI SUNT EUM* (1455)

In «*Relictis omnibus secuti sunt eum*», Cusanus speaks of faith as a metaphorical ship that guides the soul over the instability of “sensible waters”:

What is a ship if not the means by which [something] is conveyed over the water, [which] otherwise is heavy and by its nature submersible in water. [...] For faith conveys the nature of the soul over the waters of sensible instability. [...] Attend how the ship is the work of the intellect. A beast does not have the art of building a ship, and when it cannot help itself out of the natural power of swimming, then it sinks. And because in that work [i.e., of the intellect] the intellectual power illuminates many things, then you know that faith in Jesus must be received in the intellectual power so that

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 19 27–30: «Oportet autem omnem discipulum primo attente audire, deinde audita attente considerare, ut possit finaliter in se auditorum veritatem intueri.»

<sup>71</sup> In *Sermo* 189, 19 31–41: «Parvulis igitur et simplicibus, qui aptiores sunt ad credendum quam scientes et huius mundi sapientes, revelantur ea quae regni Dei sunt et manent abscondita sapientibus, ut ait Jesus.»

the soul can attain a goal beyond its nature. [...] Large fish are not caught, unless the ship of faith is led to the height of the intellect.<sup>72</sup>

Faith conveys the soul, which is weighed down by the material aspect of its nature, across the waters of sensible experience in which it would naturally tend to sink, to a higher realm. Once again Cusanus immediately refers this particular capacity of faith directly to the *intellect*; for in fact the intellect is the harbour, so to speak, in which faith resides. Thus when Cusanus states that beasts cannot avail themselves of the ship of faith, it is precisely because they lack the defining human characteristic of reason. Because the ship of faith was built by the intellect, it is therefore is an exclusively human privilege. To transcend the limitations of man's nature, although it requires faith, does not entail abandoning the intellect, for, as Cusanus states here clearly, faith must be received *in* the intellectual power. Faith is an intellectual act which culminates at the "height of the intellect", not beyond it.

#### SERMON 245: *CRUCIFIXUS RESURREXIT* (1456)

In *Crucifixus resurrexit*, Cusanus identifies two types of desire, namely, carnal and spiritual (*concupiscentia carnis et spiritus*). Notably, his definition of the latter again refers to the intellect: "Love of eternal things is virtue and comes from desire of the intellectual spirit, which is not of this world [but] which comes from heaven".<sup>73</sup> A man is composed of both carnal and spiritual desire, however tends to cling to the former, out of ignorance.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> h *Sermo* 193 3 21–23, 4 2–4, 13–19, « Quid navis nisi medium, quo vehitur supra aquas, alias grave et de sua natura in aqua submersibile? [...] Nam fides vehit naturam animae supra aquas sensibilis instabilitatis. [...] Attende, quomodo navis est opus intellectus. Bestia non habet modum faciendi navem, sed ubi se non potest iuvare ex virtute naturae in natando, ibi deficit. Et quia in opere illo multum relucet virtus intellectualis, tunc scias fidem Iesu recipi oportere in virtute intellectuali ad hoc quod anima assequi possit finem supra naturam. [...] Non capiuntur magni pisces, nisi ducatur navis fidei in altitudinem intelligentiae. »

<sup>73</sup> h *Sermo* 245, 4 10–12: « Amor aeternorum est virtuosus, et venit de desiderio intellectualis spiritus, qui non est de hoc mundo, qui venit de caelo. »

<sup>74</sup> The carnal desire Cusanus identifies as "female", and the spiritual as "male", the latter having to struggle against the former: « In hac copula mulier, scilicet carnis concupiscentia, laborat, ut vir, scilicet concupiscentia spiritus, sibi amore alligetur et ponat ipsam finem suae concupiscentiae, ut non aliud quam voluptatem sensibilem concupiscat, ut fiat eius desiderium penitus carneum et ipsa dominetur viro. Et quia habet familiare contubernium secum, allicit continue sua pulchritudine sensibili, et vincit plerumque voluntas carnis crucifigendo spiritum. Et hoc venit ex ignorantia, quia spiritus nescit nobilitatem

Since “no one can of his own power, which he has from Adam, conquer the world”,<sup>75</sup> this ignorance can be overcome only by faith:

So it is necessary that this ignorance, through which all fall, be driven out by faith. For faith is about things which are not seen. Eternity is not seen. We cannot aspire to eternal life except through faith. But we cannot reach this faith unless through the faith of all faiths, which is that our teacher Jesus is the Son of God and was crucified.<sup>76</sup>

Faith enables man to overcome carnal desire by connecting him with the spiritual desire that pertains to his intellect and thus is the natural counterpart of faith. That faith is the cure for sinful, fleshly desire moreover corresponds with Cusanus' intellectual view of sin as the result of ignorance: since faith is seated in the intellect, it is naturally suited to combat ignorance and error.

In the above passage Cusanus also notably identifies faith as faith in Christ as the crucified son of God, bringing his more abstract, epistemological sense of faith together with the faith of Scripture. However, Cusanus' interest in this sermon is to interpret the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection in terms of personal transformation and deification. In this connection, faith in these things refers more to the understanding of our ability to crucify the carnal aspect of our nature so that our divine, intellectual nature may arise victorious, than to faith in the respective actual events.<sup>77</sup>

#### SERMON 268: *SIC CURRITE, UT COMPREHENDATIS* (1457)

In this sermon we find a discussion which appears at first to strongly oppose faith to reason, insofar as it asserts the necessity that faith con-

---

suam et vilitatem carnis, neque scit Deum aut vitam aeternam, neque infernum seu mortem aeternam.» Ibid., 5 3–16.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 7 1–2: «Sed nemo in sua propria virtute, quam habet ex Adam, potest vincere mundum.»

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 7 2–9: «Tunc oportet, quod haec ignorantia, per quam omnes corruerunt, fide pellatur. Fides enim est de re, quae non videtur. Aeterna non videntur. Aspirare ad aeternam vitam non nisi fide possumus. Sed ad hanc fidem pertingere non possumus nisi per fidem omnis fidei, quae est, quod magister noster Iesus sit Filius Dei et crucifixus.»

<sup>77</sup> Cf., eg., ibid., 2 1–7: «Quando attendimus in nobis esse imperia diversa, unum in carne et aliud in spiritu, quae contra se militant, et quod subactio virtutis, quae in carne imperat, est crucifixio vincente virtute, quae in rationali anima imperat, tunc mysterium crucifixionis quoad ea, quae facere debemus, intelligimus.» Again, we see how Cusanus' interest is in the abstract significance of the contents of Scripture, as these may be interpreted intellectually.

quer reason, seemingly through the force of will alone. The will is thereby shown to be integrally linked to faith, insofar as only it has the power to subjugate reason into obedient faith:

This must be noted: how that faith, by which mortal man believes he can attain immortality, can only be attained "in great struggle" [re. 1 Cor. 9:25–26]; for in this victory, through which faith conquers reason, there is much anguish. For when Abraham believed that which reason judges impossible, he conquered [reason]. So when man believes this, namely, that he will be resurrected to eternal life, of which he has no reason or experience, and concludes this in opposition to his reason, then it is necessary that that reason perish and his discretion cease and his pride be humbled, and that the stubbornness of his mind be mortified, and that the man become as though unknowing and foolish and obedient to his freedom, namely, from reason, withdrawing into himself, having been reduced to captivity. And this is the greatest anguish, not against [the mortification of] the flesh and blood, but against [that of] the spirit of stubbornness and pride, where humility conquers pride.<sup>78</sup>

Just as Abraham's decision to obey God's command involved much anguish, so does the rational soul of man submit to faith only through great struggle and with, it seems, a sense of loss, since that to which it is required to submit is a rational impossibility, and in this sense entails its own death. This death of reason hearkens back to the self-crucifixion of reason spoken of in Sermon 133, where it was portrayed as a death necessary for the resurrection of the intellect. Indeed, reason pertains to the mortal aspect of man, insofar as it knows only what is attained through the senses, whereas intellect pertains to what is immortal in man. Therefore the resurrection of the intellect through the sacrifice of reason is akin to the resurrection of the immortal soul through the death of the mortal body.

Reason is here identified as a form of pride and stubbornness, and faith is likened to a state of captivity, to which the soul must become a humble

---

<sup>78</sup> h *Sermo* 268, 18 1–18: « Hic est attendendum quod fides illa, qua mortalis homo credit immortalitatem assequi posse, non acquiritur nisi 'in agone' certaminis; nam in hac victoria, qua fides rationem vincit, est maxima lucta. Quando enim Abraham credidit id quod ratio impossibile iudicavit, vicit. Sic quando homo credit hoc, scilicet quod resurget ad vitam immortalem, cuius non habet nec rationem nec experientiam, et in oppositum eius ratio trahit, tunc necesse est quod moriatur ipsa ratio et cedat prudentia eius et humilietur superbia, praesumptio mentis et mortificetur, et fiat homo quasi insipiens et stultus et servilis de sua libertate, scilicet rationis, recedens se in captivitatem redigendo. Et haec lucta est maxima, non contra carnem et sanguine, sed contra spiritum praesumptuosum et superbum, ubi humilitas vincit superbiam. »

and willing slave, abandoning itself even to foolishness and *stultitia* (re. 1 Cor. 3:19). However the faith which subjugates reason, seemingly by force, is actually an expression of man's free will:

Therefore the ability to believe is the greatest power of our soul; for it exceeds the intellective power. For it reaches those who will, since to believe proceeds out of free will. For the rational soul can believe, if it wills, or not; and this is the greatest gift of God. Thus through faith, the spirit or free will assumes that which is ruled by the intellect and impresses it with its shape. For it speaks to the intellect imperatively. And this is why they say that faith is in the speculative intellect under the command of the will, because it does not allow the intellect to act discursively unless it has been conditioned by faith. But the intellect grasps faith easily, which it does not understand, when the will, through faith, tells it to believe these things that it hears because they were revealed to it by the Son of God or through the word of God.<sup>79</sup>

The ability to believe exceeds the intellective power in the sense that faith is the intellect *in potentia*. Because, as we have seen in other sermons, the intellect cannot fully be unless actualized through faith, intellect is subject to that which has the power to effect this actualization, namely belief. However a powerful act of will must accompany faith, or it would not overcome the resistance of the rational soul. Thus, paradoxically, the subjection of the rational soul through an act of will is the highest expression of man's free will, because it is for the sake of the higher truth of the intellect.

However when Cusanus writes that the will "commands" the intellect to believe the Word, and does not permit it to act unless so "conditioned" by belief, it does sound as though the intellect too, is subjugated rather than actualized by faith. What is really meant, when Cusanus says that the will "tells" the intellect to accept the Faith because it was revealed, and that faith "impresses" the intellect with its shape? Given that he regards the divine principle to be intellectual in nature, it is unlikely that he intends to oppose faith to the intellect in any way. And indeed, as Cusanus contin-

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 19 1–16: « Posse igitur credere est maxima animae nostrae virtus; excedit enim virtutem intellectivam. Ad illa enim pertingit quae vult; nam credere procedit ex libertate voluntatis. Potest enim rationalis anima credere, si vult vel non; et hoc est donum Dei maximum. Ita spiritus seu libera voluntas per fidem quam assumit, dominatur intellectui et informat eum sua forma. Loquitur enim intellectui imperatively. Et hoc est, quod quidam dicebant fidem esse in intellectu speculativo sub imperio voluntatis, quia non sinit intellectum nisi habituatam fide discurrere. Sed intellectus facile capit fidem, quam non intelligit, quando voluntas per fidem sibi annuntiat haec credere quae audivit, quia sibi a Dei Filio seu per verbum Dei revelata sunt. »

ues, it emerges that the will, faith, and intellect are all essentially working together for the sake of the same goal:

For the will is like the soul's hearing, the intellect like its vision. Thus that which the soul, zealous for the good, hears, it reports to the intellect, in order that it [i.e., the intellect] would itself see, because such things as those which it reports cannot be seen. It [i.e., the intellect] believes that which is reported to it to be true and grasps it like a vision, as if it had seen it. So faith as far as it is understood is in the coincidence of the visible and the invisible, for it is a vision of the invisible.<sup>80</sup>

The soul "hears" through faith of that truth which is the natural *desiderium* of the intellect. It then "reports" this truth to the intellect, so that it may be able to attain its desired goal. That which the will "reports", the intellect is able to grasp "like" a vision; i.e., as an image or similitude of that "invisible" truth that it seeks. In this way the will, through faith, is able to make the "invisible" "visible" to the intellect. And here, note Cusanus' pointed use of the word *coincidentia*. For divine Truth, as we know, is beyond the coincidence of opposites. This is something that reason cannot grasp, but which the intellect, according to Cusanus, can. Therefore when the will "speaks" to the intellect of this invisible vision, the intellect believes it—not as though by coercion, but because in this image of coincidence the intellect recognizes its own principle and true nature.

As such, Cusanus goes on to say, the love of truth, which characterizes the intellect, is really *the same* as the will; for it is only through this aforementioned act of the will that the intellect achieves its intellectual goal:

Therefore the object of desire of the intellectual soul, by virtue of which it desires to know, is the will or love of truth, which, since it cannot attain its object of desire by means of the intellect, it believes through the word of God as though of its own power. And it does not believe this word of God to be because it understands, but understands because it believes.<sup>81</sup>

The will to believe in the Word thus coincides with the love of truth, such that there is no conflict or opposition between the intellect and the will.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 19 17–24: « Voluntas enim est quasi auditus animae, intellectus quasi visus. Ideo quae anima zelosa ad bonum audit, nuntiat intellectui, ut videat se, quia talia sunt quae nuntiat videri nequeunt. Credit sibi vera esse annuntiata et capit quasi visa, hoc est in certitudine, ac si vidisset. Sic fides quoad intellectum est in coincidentia visibilis et invisibilis, nam est visio invisibilis. »

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 20 5–11: « Desiderium igitur animae intellectualis, quo scire desiderat, est voluntas seu amor ad veritatem, quae cum non possit medio intellectus attingere desideratum, quasi ex propriis viribus credit verbo Dei. Et non credit hoc verbum Dei esse, quia intelligit, sed intelligit, quia credit. »

Put otherwise, the will is an intellectual will. And when Cusanus writes that the intellect cannot attain its object of desire without the will acting through faith, this is to say that the intellect is not actualized without the "vision" of the "invisible" truth which it provides. This is thus Cusanus' interpretation of Isaiah 7:9: understanding is not possible without faith, but what faith provides, through an act of will, is only believed by the intellect because it is an image of the truth that it seeks.

Cusanus' fundamental epistemological optimism is reflected in this scheme, whereby the intellect really cannot fail to attain its object of desire. For the very fact that the intellect desires truth, according to Cusanus, is a virtual guarantee that this truth must exist, and moreover be attainable. For what would be the point of intellectual desire if it could not be fulfilled? Thus it seems to him that our rational desire for truth must have been implanted by a rational God, along with the means to attain it:

The divine reason which gives to our rational soul this desire to grasp the immortal by the speaking of the desire to the spirit, instils that this desire would not have been given, if the rational creature could not attain it. Thus he who gave this desire, likewise is capable of giving its effect.<sup>82</sup>

However, this teleological argument is not the only one Cusanus provides for the attainability of truth; for, as we have seen, one of his primary arguments against affective theology was that the very desire for truth implies that it is somehow already present to the intellect, for nothing utterly unknown is sought after.

At the end of Sermon 268, Cusanus returns to the theme of anguish with which he began:

So [our rational soul] accepts the word of Jesus as the word of God, which alone promises to give it eternal life, which the spirit above all desires with anguish, and receives Christ as teacher and as the word of God made flesh, as by this means he is made happy. And thus it is clear that through that lamenting the true virtue of faith is reached: through that lamenting, in which the faithful soul is produced and believes in God. So do laments accord with the magnitude of faith; for that which conquers in every struggle is faith [...].<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 21 1–7: «Ratio divina quae dedit animae nostrae rationali hoc desiderium ad immortalitatis comprehensionem loquendo in spiritu desiderii, inspirat, quod hoc desiderium non foret datum, si non posset rationalis creatura assequi. Ideo qui dedit hoc desiderium, etiam potens est dare eius effectum.»

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 21 1–7: «Sic ad fidem movetur, ut id Deo possibile credat, quod quomodo fiat, non potest attingere. Et ita verbo Dei, quod fidelibus felicitatem promittit, credit et id quod promittit, credit esse verbum Dei. Sic verbum Iesu recipit ut verbum Dei, quod solum



Truth is attained through the anguish of reason, whereby the soul transcends its animal nature to fulfill its true desire, which is an intellectual desire, through faith assisted by the will. The more greatly reason suffers, the closer the rational soul comes to truth, as it is pushed to a vision of the invisible, wherein the intellect sees an image of its object of desire. This account is strongly reminiscent of *De visione Dei*, where we saw that the language of opposition and strife was very prominent, and the effectiveness of the “all-seeing icon” for mystical theology lay primarily in the way it forcibly contradicts reason, jarring it towards a vision of the divine in which contradictories coincide.

SERMON 275: *NON SUMUS ANCILLAE FILII* (1457)

In *Non sumus ancillae filii*, Cusanus uses the virgin birth as a metaphor for the “sterile fecundity” of faith, which produces truth in the absence of reason, just as Mary bore the Son of God although a virgin.<sup>84</sup> Whereas the intellect is the “font” from which all reasons flow, he explains, faith is “sterile”, in the sense that no reasons may be said to flow from it:

In the intellect is the fecundity of a source [*fons*], for it generates the flow of reasons, to which it communicates its intellectual likeness. For it radiates its fecundity into [those] reasons, which are beautiful and good to the extent that the intellect shines into them. However faith is sterile, because it has none of those daughters, or reasons [...].<sup>85</sup>

---

promittit se daturum vitam aeternam, quam super omnia spiritus ingemiscendo desiderat, et recipit Christum ut magistrum et verbum Dei caro factum, ut eius medio felicitetur. Et ita patet, per quam luctam pervenitur ad veram fidei virtutem: per hanc luctam, in qua anima fidelis efficitur et credit Deo. Tunc secundum fidei magnitudinem sunt luctae; nam id quod vincit in omni certamine, fides est [...].»

<sup>84</sup> Cusanus makes this comparison with reference to Galatians 4:27: «Scriptum est enim, laetare sterilis quae non parit; erumpe et exclama quae non parturit, quia multi filii desertae, magis quam eius quae habet virum.» Cusanus writes: «Dicit enim: ‘Laetare sterilis’, nam mater nostra est, in qua sterilitas est fecunditas, sicut in Maria virginitas fuit fecunditas, quia edidit benedictionem omnium gentium. Fides enim, quae haec fecit in Maria, illa est sterilis.» h *Sermo* 275, 2 3–7.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 1–7: «In intellectu quaedam est fecunditas fontalis; nam generat flumina rationum, quibus suam similitudinem intellectualem communicat. Relucet enim eius fecunditas in rationibus, quae in tanto sunt pulchrae et bonae in quanto intellectus in ipsis relucet.»

However, while faith is rightly considered “sterile” with respect to reason, nevertheless, if accepted, it can be very productive.<sup>86</sup> And in this connection, Cusanus makes a number of references to Scripture, including the example of Sarah, who was able to bear a child even though barren, and the Virgin Mary, who through faith bore the Son of God.<sup>87</sup>

The nature of faith’s fecundity is said to operate by virtue of a “hidden” property, just as a medicine prescribed by a physician cures an ailment, though not even the doctor can really explain why it works. Therefore, just as we take medicines on the advice of our physician, so we should accept the Word on the authority of faith, whose effects are proven (i.e., manifest in Scripture), although they are inexplicable:

Nevertheless no reason for this [cure] can be given, because the effect proceeds out of a hidden and specific property, and believing in the authority of he who is the expert, he accepts this as true, although no reason persuades him of this. And from those medicines we experience greater and more infallible effects than when doctors compose remedies based on rational investigation. Therefore faith that the word of incarnated God can cure all afflictions of the soul and renew its youth [...], is like an expert remedy which has this [effect] from a specific property. And he who believes this as true will through his own experience receive happiness. This receiving is seeing [*videre*], which is a greater certainty than reasoning [*ratiocinari*]<sup>88</sup>

Cusanus appears at first to advocate an approach to faith which we seldom see with him, namely, the acceptance of faith on the basis of authority alone. However, as usual, he appends a remark which already begins to hint at a deeper connection between faith and intellect. Here it is his identification of receiving the “cure” of faith as *videre*, and the opposition of this to *ratiocinari*, or discursive reasoning. Knowing that Cusanus always associates “seeing” with *intellectus*, and discursive reasoning with

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 4 1–2: « Sic fides est sterilis; sed dum ipsam recte consideramus, illa sterilitas est fecunditas. »

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 4–6.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 7 1–8 8: « Notabis autem bene, quomodo in sterilitate fidei est maior fecunditas; nam uti medici dicunt, qui empirici nominantur, tunc quaedam herbae faciunt mirandas curas. Et hoc experimur verum, ut quod scammonia purgat cholera. Nulla tamen ratio de hoc reddi potest, quoniam procedit effectus ex occulta et specifica proprietate, et credens auctoritati eius, qui expertus est, reperit hoc verum, licet nulla ratio hoc persuadeat. Et de illis medicinis nos experimur maiores et infallibiliores effectus quam ubi physici per rationem investigantem medelam componunt. Fides igitur, quod verbum Dei incarnatum curet omnem animae languorem et faciat ipsam renovare suam iuventutem [...], est ut experta medela, quae a proprietate specifica hoc habet. Et si quis credit hoc verum, ille per experientiam se reperiet felicem. Hoc reperire est videre, quae est maior certitudo quam ratiocinari. »

the lower domain of *ratio*, it is evident that the “hidden property” in faith is nothing other than *intellectus*; and it is for this reason that to trust in the authority of Scripture is actually a more elevatedly intellectual act than ratiocination. The authority of Scripture is rationally justified because there is reason to trust it, just as there is reason to trust one’s doctor: he is an expert because he contains within him the knowledge of your cure, Scripture is an expert because it contains the seeds of truth.

SERMON 289: *SIC CURRITE, UT COMPREHENDATIS* (1459)

The last of Cusanus’ sermons containing an extensive treatment of faith is one of the four “reform” sermons he preached in Rome after having left his Brixen bishopric. Similar in many ways to the previous “*Sic currite*” sermon, this one presents the most comprehensive account of the relation of faith, reason, love, hope, and the will; giving a better picture of the role each plays in Cusan theology. In fact, we have seen that Cusanus frequently picked up elements of previous sermons in his discussions of faith; such that each subsequent discussion has in general tended to develop his view, expanding it to include, e.g., the role of love, and then that of the will.

In this highly philosophical sermon, Cusanus reasserts the primacy of the intellect, which he identifies as the origin of all movement, referring to Aristotle’s designation of God as the *primum intellectum*, by virtue of which everything is ordered.

We are in this world “according to the inward man”<sup>89</sup> exiles and strangers, not having a “lasting city”,<sup>90</sup> running towards whatever we have determined as our end, which all running desires. For no one runs for the sake of running; [rather] that which is moved is moved for the sake of stillness. But a natural movement is other than the movement of the understanding. For they are moved in the same way as is a horse and the one riding it: the horse necessarily under the direction of the rider, the rider by choice. However for what reason does one require a horse so that he may run? Certainly in order to attain [*comprehendere*] [something]. The end, therefore, is the cause of causes, by whose grace all things exist.

However that which acts for the sake of an end is called the intellect, which is thus the origin of movement for the purpose of arranging and

<sup>89</sup> Re. Rom. 7:22: « Condelector enim legi Dei secundum interiorem hominem. »

<sup>90</sup> Re. Heb. 13:14: « Non enim habemus hic manentem civitatem sed futuram inquirimus. »

ordering everything. Therefore by ordering what we experience in nature we see in motion the first intelligence or creator of the first intellect, which Paul called God, who is the cause of order, saying: Those things which are from God are ordered.<sup>91</sup> Therefore just as we see a horse holding a straight path to the city and not wandering off into the country, we know this to be like its [i.e., the intellect's] desire, because the rider so directs it to the location which he seeks. Thus so long as we see our body moving by means of the animal towards the "lasting city" of the heavenly citizen, then we know that motion to be under the direction of the intellectual spirit, which directs the animal.<sup>92</sup>

Intellect is the essence of all purposeful activity, insofar as God, as *primum intellectum*, is the source of all movement and all order. Therefore by applying our intellect to the activity of giving order to the sensible phenomenon that we experience in nature, we can be certain that we are moving in the right direction, namely towards God. So long as the intellect is in control of the body (i.e., the senses), it may use the latter as a vehicle to help carry it towards its goal, which is vision of the *primum intellectum*, without fear of becoming lost or wandering off the path. This description is strongly reminiscent of Cusanus' definition of the essence of the mind's activity as *mensurare* in *Idiota de mente*, and as *discernere* in *Idiota de sapientia*, where the example of merchandise being sorted, measured, and weighed in the marketplace was presented as an apt example of the same.

However, although the intellect seems thus to be accorded the position of primary importance in the human soul, Cusanus then qualifies

---

<sup>91</sup> Re. Rom. 13:1: « Non est enim potestas nisi a Deo quae autem sunt a Deo ordinatae sunt. »

<sup>92</sup> h *Sermo* 289, 2 1—3 15: « Sumus in hoc mundo secundum interiorem hominem exules et peregrini non habentes manentem civitatem, currentes ad aliquem nobis determinatum finem, quem omnis currens desiderat. Nemo enim currit, ut currat; quod movetur propter quietem movetur. Sed alius est motus naturae, alius motus intelligentiae. Moventur enim tam equus quam equitans; equus sub directione sessoris necessitatur, sessor electione. Cur autem necessitate equum, ut currat? Certe ut comprehendat. Finis igitur est causa causarum, cuius gratia omnia sunt. Id autem quod agit propter finem dicitur intellectus, qui ideo est principium motus omnia ad intentum disponens et ordinans. Ordine igitur quem in natura experimur videmus intelligentiam primam seu conditorem intellectum primum movens, quem Paulus nominat, qui est causa ordinis, dicens: Quae a Deo sunt ordinate sunt. Sicut igitur videntes equum tenere viam rectam ad civitatem et non vagari in campo iuxta sua desideria scimus hoc esse, quia sessor sic ipsum dirigit ad locum quem ipse appetit, ita, dum videmus animale corpus nostrum moveri ad manentem civitatem caelestium civium, scimus hunc motum esse ex directione intellectualis spiritus, qui ipsum animal dirigit. »

the above assertions by stating that the intellect too requires direction, namely, from *faith* and *hope*:

But what directs the intellect? Certainly faith. For unless the one running believed the course ended in attainment [*comprehensio*] and hoped to attain the end of his course, he would not run. For he who sows, sows in hope.<sup>93</sup>

And faith and hope are in turn dependent on *love*, which provides the impetus, or desire to attain something, and in the absence of which there would be no movement towards a goal:

But what animates the faith and hope which we cling to while running, since without the soul or spirit there is no motion? Certainly love. For love is the spirit of life, faith, and hope.<sup>94</sup>

However, it soon becomes clear that faith, hope, and love do not “direct” the intellect as from above or outside of it, but rather that these are internal aspects of the intellect’s movement. For, although it requires faith, love, and hope, the ascent “to the incorruptible divine end” is an ascent of the intellect, which moreover culminates in an intellectual seeing, and thus is ultimately an intellectual as opposed to an affective phenomenon.<sup>95</sup>

Cusanus then goes on to assert that the sensible part of our nature is subject to the direction of the will, which can choose to act against our natural inclinations. However the will is necessarily intellectual in nature. For the essence of willing is choosing to do one thing rather than another, an activity which involves *discrimination*:

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 4 1–5: «Sed quid dirigit intellectum? Certe fides. Nam nisi currens crederet finem cursus esse apprehensionem et speraret suum cursum finem attingere, non curreret. Qui enim in seminat in spe seminat.»

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 4 5–8: «Sed quid animat fidem et spem, quae in cursu apprehendimus, cum sine anima seu spiritu non sit motus? Certe caritas. Nam caritas est spiritus vitae, fidei et spei.»

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 5 1–4. Thurner also noted how hope and love serve a function within the knowledge-process: “[...] so muss [...] den von Cusanus gemäß biblischer Vorgabe mit dem Glauben zusammen genannten Vollzügen von Hoffnung und Liebe eine tiefere Bedeutung in der Ermöglichung des natürlichen Intellektvollzugs des Menschen zu-erkannt werden. [...] Die unbezweifelte Hoffnung erweist sich dabei als der in jedem Erkenntnisakt vorausgesetzte Rückbezug auf die Gewissheit der Wahrheitsprinzipien. [...] Weil der Mensch in jedem Erkenntnisakt das von Gott grundlos geschenkte Wahrheitslicht empfängt, ereignet sich im tiefsten Grunde des endlichen Intellektvollzuges ein Liebesgeschehen zwischen Gott und Mensch” (Thurner [2001], p. 196). I would however go further to say that hope and love are subject to an interpretation in Cusanus whereby they have no existence outside of the intellect. They are expressions, or aspects, of the operation of the intellect.

[I]n man we experience that the sensible power is directed towards the opposite of its desire, such as to chastity and abstinence. Therefore we know that which the sensible power obeys to be a higher power, which is the free will. However the free will can only be in a thing that has an intellectual nature. For will presupposes intellect, since it is choice. Choice is comparing and discerning [*discernens*].<sup>96</sup>

Choice is an intellectual operation, being a type of discernment and therefore so is the action of the will. Thus even willing is an expression of, rather than a limitation on the intellect, according to Cusanus.

As Cusanus continues to discuss the respective roles played by faith, hope, love, and the will, it becomes clear that there is no strict hierarchy amongst them, but rather a mutual entailment:

So I call that high power faith, which directs the nature of the free will to have the hope which lives out of faith, which is [in turn] moved out of love. Therefore it has love. But just as the intellect in man is the living form, forming and vivifying everything, so love exists in that unitrine power.<sup>97</sup>

It appears that faith, hope, and love in combination with the will, form a complex of interdependent factors, all of which together support the activity of the intellect: its desire for and impetus towards a goal (love), its aspiration and expectation of success (hope), and its inner intuition of that goal (faith), maintained by the volition to resist the pull of our carnal nature, and remain on the right path (will).

All of these come together in the attainment of an intellectual vision of God. For man's ultimate happiness, according to Cusanus, consists only in this.<sup>98</sup> The goal of the intellect is also described as an "intellectual knowing beyond its nature", by which Cusanus certainly means the "unknowing knowing" referred to by Dionysius in his first letter to Gaius, which

<sup>96</sup> h *Sermo* 289, 5 9–16: « [...] in homine experimur virtutem sensitivam dirigi ad contraria eius desideria, ut ad castitatem et abtinentiam. Scimus igitur altiozem virtutem illam esse, cui virtus sensitiva oboedit, quae est libera voluntas. Non potest autem libera voluntas esse nisi in intellectuali natura. Arbitrium enim praesupponit intellectum, cum sit electio. Electio est comparans et discernens. »

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 5 17–23: « Sic dico virtutem illam altam, quae naturam liberi arbitrii dirigit, habere spem, quae vivit ex fide, fidem, quae movetur ex caritate. Habet igitur caritatem. Sed sicut intellectus in homine est forma viva omnia formans et vivificans, sic se habet caritas in hac virtute unitrina. »

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 6 18–26: « Felicitas autem est sine ambiguo finis perfectionis in stabili aeternitate. Unde sicut quamdiu rem non vidimus, nobis gradus ultimae sensibilis cognitionis deficit, ita quamdiu tantum scimus veritatem et ipsam non videmus visione illa, quae est ultima fructiva cognitio, nondum ad finem desideriorum attigimus. Igitur felicitas in visione intellectus conditoris omnium exsistit. »

Cusanus discussed in his September 14, 1453 letter to Aindorffer,<sup>99</sup> and which forms the basis of his intellective interpretation both of Dionysius and of mystical theology. Accordingly, Cusanus then makes reference to the Christian-Neoplatonic doctrine of participation, by virtue of which man's intellect is able to partake of a knowing which exceeds its created nature:

[...] and through the doctrine of participation, the intellectual nature becomes a knowing beyond its nature, namely, a divine knowing [...].<sup>100</sup>

And this doctrine of divine participation, according to Cusanus, is found in "neither philosophy, nor logic, nor discursive reasoning, nor rational persuasion, nor rhetoric", but in the Gospel, which contains "the divine teaching of Christ the Son of God, which as such can grasp one who partakes of that teaching",<sup>101</sup> namely, by teaching Christiformity, through which man participates in the divine nature and may attain an understanding beyond human nature, whereby he "sees and knows in the same way as angels".<sup>102</sup>

Christiformity is the essence of "formed faith", according to Cusanus. And the difference between formed, or living, faith and unformed faith is precisely a matter of the intellect:

Therefore love, which is the doctrine of Christ, is poured forth in Christiform hearts through the Holy Spirit, as the apostle said.<sup>103</sup> Behold the difference between the living Christian having the spirit of love and the dead one lacking in spirit. They are those who have Christ as though in a sensible body, namely, in unformed faith, who believe everything that is said about Christ in the gospel, just as the demons, who tremble with fear, but do not have *the living Christ, who lives not in the senses but is received in the rational spirit or intellect*.<sup>104</sup> [my italics]

<sup>99</sup> Vansteenbergh (1915), pp. 113–117.

<sup>100</sup> h *Sermo* 289, 7 18–20: «[...] et per doctrinae participationem intellectualis natura fit sciens supra suam naturam, scilicet divina scientia [...].»

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 7 1–6, 16–: «Quae autem sit doctrina illius divini spiritus, patet. Nam est evangelium, scilicet annuntiatio bona. Non philosophia aut logica seu discursiva ratiocinatio seu rationalis persuasio sive locutio, sed Filii Dei annuntiatio, quae per virtutem operum ostensa est. [...] Evangelium igitur est divina doctrina Christi Filii Dei, quae sic potest capi quod quis illius doctrinae particeps [...].»

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.: «[...] videns et sciens conformiter ut angeli seu dii [...].»

<sup>103</sup> Re. Romans 5:5: «Spes autem non confundit quia caritas Dei diffusa est in cordibus nostris per Spiritum Sanctum qui datus est nobis.»

<sup>104</sup> h *Sermo* 289, 8 1–11: «Caritas igitur, quae est doctrina Christi, est diffusa in cordibus christiformium per Spiritum Sanctum, ut ait apostolus. Ecce quae est differentia inter vivum christianum habentem spiritum caritatis et mortuum spiritu carentem. Sunt qui



Faith, to Cusanus, cannot be mere belief or assent to what one hears of the contents of Scripture. Such a faith is at any rate unformed, and is “dead” to the extent that it remains at the level of the sensible word. Thus we see, in Cusanus’ final sermon on the subject, that while faith, hope, love, and the will all play a necessary role in Christiformity, in the final analysis “the living Christ” is only received *in spiritu rationali seu intellectu*.<sup>105</sup>

#### CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: FAITH AND INTELLECTUAL FULFILMENT IN THE LATER SERMONS

The foregoing analysis has shown how, in the post-*De docta ignorantia* sermons, Cusanus refines and deepens his position on faith and reason. The fundamentally intellectual nature of faith is emphasized with increasing decisiveness as Cusanus grows more assured that the surest and truest approach to God is through an intellective mystical theology. This approach does not exclude affect, but rather subsumes hope and love within the knowledge-process by making them aspects of the intellect’s operation. Willing, too, as we saw, is a fundamentally intellectual act; and thus the way Cusanus describes “formed” faith differs significantly from Thomas, to whom this was a matter of love animating the will to move the intellect to assent on behalf of the good.<sup>106</sup> Because, to Cusanus, both love and the will are essentially functions of the intellect, neither can act

---

Christum habent quasi in sensibili corpore, scilicet in fide informi, qui credunt omnia quae de Christo loquitur evangelium, sicut et daemones, qui contremiscunt, sed non habent Christum vivum, quae vita non est in sensu sed in spiritu rationali seu intellectu receptibilis. » Re. Jam. 2:19: « Tu credis quoniam unus est Deus bene facis et daemones credunt et contremescunt. »

<sup>105</sup> In his study of the role of love in the sermons, Roth states that, although to Cusanus faith, hope, and love are connected “aufs engste”, to the point where they are “kaum unterscheidbar”, nevertheless “kann man nicht sagen, daß er etwa die Liebe rein rational versteht”; yet he also admits that “Glaube als Selbstvertrauen der Vernunft bestimmt wird” (Roth [2000], pp. 303–305). However, he stops short of pointing out that the consequence of this coincidence of faith and reason is that love and the other virtues have no function independent of the intellect. Therefore, in this sense at least, Cusanus does have a very rational understanding of love.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*. IIaIIae.5.2. As Stump explains, to Thomas: “In the case of those who have formed faith, the will moves the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith because the will is drawn by its hunger for what is in fact God’s goodness. The resulting faith is called ‘formed faith’ because in it the intellectual assent to the propositions of faith takes its form from the charity or love of goodness that animates the will” (Stump, E. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 364).

upon the latter from without in this manner. With Cusanus, it is more a matter of the intellect acting on itself.

Rather than opposing intellective to affective theology, Cusanus seeks instead to show how affect really *is* intellective in nature. Man's purpose on earth is indeed to understand the truth and love the good—but to do the latter is essentially to do the former. Cusanus also grows increasingly positive about the possibility of attaining divine knowledge in this life through the practice of mystical theology, i.e., through the development of the intellect in faith. Correspondingly, those features associated with dogmatic faith, such as grace, revelation, passivity, and credulity receive less attention.

By the 1450s, Cusanus had significantly developed and extended his earlier attempts to unify faith and reason. What we see in Sermon 130 is a long way from *fides quaerens intellectum*, and, against Kremer, we can confirm Roth's assertion that the Cusan model of faith and reason goes beyond the Thomistic position that reason is compatible with faith.<sup>107</sup> Cusanus certainly believes that they are compatible, but moreover locates the source of that compatibility in the ultimate *identity* of faith and reason. It is not that Cusanus ever rejects Isaiah 7:9, but rather that his interpretation of it comes to mean something more like "unless faith were inherently present in the intellect, you would not understand".

A model furthermore emerges in the later sermons of faith as the *actualizing* force of the latent, or potential, intellect in the spirit of man. Faith is present in the mind of every man by virtue of his human nature; however it remains in a state of potency with respect to truth until it is "actualized" by a turning towards its origin. Because faith is "built in" to human nature in this way, the intellect cannot really fail to possess truth—it need only turn towards it. This turning, however, is itself a pre-eminently intellectual act, although it occurs above *ratio*. As such, even the mortification of reason through faith is yet in the service of the intellect. The faith to which one turns is the sum of Christian truth; nevertheless it is not primarily a turning to Scripture that Cusanus advocates for the actualization of the intellect in faith (although Scripture is a reliable source of truth,

---

<sup>107</sup> Kremer (2006), p. 78, n. 109. Cf. Roth (2000), pp. 36–37: "Stehen im Thomasischen Werk Vernunft und Offenbarung einander gegenüber, wenn auch in keinem Gegensatz, so belegen die Schriftzitate aus *De docta ignorantia* I gerade eine ungeschiedene Verbindung. Für den Nachweis des trinitarischen Wesens des ersten Prinzips muß sogar überhaupt nicht auf die Offenbarung als Grundlage zurückgegriffen werden, die zumindest das Faktum für die denkerische Durchdringung bereitstellen würde."

as we saw in Sermon 275), but rather an inward turning to that Truth of which Scripture is but the outward manifestation, i.e., towards the *Verbum Dei* itself, of which the human intellect is an image.<sup>108</sup>

The fulfilment of faith in an inward, intellectual vision of Christ is also in a sense the end of faith, insofar as it is the full activation of the intellect.<sup>109</sup> It certainly involves no faith in the sense of belief in the unknown, as Cusanus asserted that it is impossible simultaneously to know and to believe the same thing. Indeed, his statement that faith is “above” hearing but “below” seeing supports this notion. Cusanus does however reserve a role for Scripture in his theology—with respect to “hearing” the sensible contents of the Faith—in that the experience of these perceptible likenesses of divine truth may through their similitude to the inner nature of the intellect trigger a recognition. Because “simple” people are more attuned to sensible phenomena, they actually have a certain advantage in this respect; however, the goal is ever an intellectual apprehension of faith, and so long as one’s experience remains at the level of sensible images, one falls short of formed faith. Thus the act of faith, as it emerges from the sermons, is not so much one of assent as of recognition; and the sensible contents of the Faith are like a blueprint of the intellect’s own structure. Faith is thus construed by Cusanus as a kind of *anamnesis*—not assent to the unknown, but the mind’s re-cognition of its own design and origin.

The fulfillment of faith is thus beyond faith only insofar as the act of believing is concerned; but insofar as faith is understood as the Christian Truth, the full activation of the intellect is the perfection of faith, as *fides* and *ratio* coincide in a vision of Truth transcending all categories of human understanding. Thus, to Kremer’s question whether Cusan predication teaches a knowledge of the Trinitarian God based on natural reason alone, the answer is, of course, both yes and no.<sup>110</sup> Or we might rather say that the question is moot: for the sermons we have examined clearly teach that such a separation of faith and reason is not possible in Cusanus.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> Thurner too recognizes to Cusanus the attainment of intellectual knowledge of God is an absolute necessity to all men, insofar as the essence of human nature is intellectual: “Das Gott erkannt werden muss, ist deshalb eine vom Menschen her bedingte Notwendigkeit, weil seine Wesensbestimmung in der Vernunftbegabung besteht und so in der Erkenntnis Gottes als des letzten Grundes ihr Ziel erreicht” (Thurner [2001], p. 40).

<sup>109</sup> As was pointed out also by Lentzen-Dies (1991), pp. 38–39.

<sup>110</sup> Kremer (2006), p. 53.

<sup>111</sup> Following his examination of the sermons, Roth also concludes that it is “wenig sinnvoll, bei Cusanus einen natürlichen Vernunftglauben vom spezifisch christlichen Glauben zu trennen” (Roth [2000], p. 306).

## CONCLUSION

### CONFLICT OR COHERENCE? THE FUSION OF FAITH AND REASON IN CUSAN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Cusanus undertook the bold and ambitious project of trying to demonstrate the essential harmony of faith and reason in Christian theology. He was motivated to defend the compatibility of philosophy with the Faith in part by the danger of heresy presented by the growth of lay devotional sects, which rejected traditional scholastic authorities in favour of a non-scientific and highly affective mystical theology. Although he viewed lay devotion much more favourably than some of his contemporaries (like Johannes Wenck), nevertheless Cusanus strongly rejected the notion of a 'theology of feeling', such as that advocated by Hugh of Balma and favoured by Vincent of Aggsbach, which, judging by the Tegernsee debate, found increasing favour in learned clerical circles. The growing popularity of affectively-oriented mystical theology was in turn a reaction against the abstraction and pedantry of scholastic theology, something of which Cusanus himself was very critical, as we have seen. However, his response was not the rejection, but the attempted rejuvenation of theological science through the development of a new methodology—one not reliant upon the opinions of authorities, but upon a process of individual intellectual reflection.

The other motivating factor behind Cusanus' integration of philosophy with theology was his keen awareness of the importance of preserving the Faith's ability to communicate with non-believers. Especially after the fall of Constantinople, Cusanus the diplomat and politician felt the exigent need for a non-polemical means by which to mediate between the Church and the infidel, and reason was the common ground of Christians, Jews, and Saracens alike. He recognized that a nominalist separation of faith and reason would eliminate that neutral space wherein argument and perhaps even conversion could take place, and thus would preclude the *pax fidei* he so sincerely desired. In this way, Cusanus' strong defence of the use of philosophy in theology is intimately connected with the search for concordance reflected in his diplomatic work. The coincidence of faith and reason he sought to demonstrate in his treatises and sermons was always directed towards the goal of establishing a universal faith.

Although Cusanus is typically characterized as a renaissance or humanist thinker who rejected tradition in favour of a radical, modern approach, in fact his major concern was to find a way to defend tradition against the forces which threatened to undermine it. This is reflected, for example, in Cusanus' reaction to Wenck's criticism, which demonstrated his eagerness to defend the orthodoxy of his doctrines and their compatibility with traditional theology. His traditionalism and conservatism is also apparent in his intellective approach to mystical theology, which shows him to be more akin to *antiqui* than *moderni*. While an ardent reformer, Cusanus was certainly no revolutionary, and possessed a deeply conservative character. Like the *antiqui* of the schools, he saw reason as the best defender of the Faith and sought to defend its role in theology.

In connection with this, we saw that the Aristotelian philosophy in fact plays a central role in Cusan doctrine, and that his characterization as a Platonist thinker needs to be rethought and carefully qualified in light of this fact. Cusanus' debate with Wenck was to a great extent a debate over Aristotle, and even the debate with Vincent of Aggsbach centrally concerned academic theology and the application of Aristotelian metaphysics within mystical theology. In both of these debates, Cusanus emerges as a *defender* of Aristotle. In particular, Cusanus denied all allegations that his doctrine of the coincidence of opposites entails the rejection of Aristotelian logic. We saw further that Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance has Thomistic roots—which is not to say that Cusanus was a Thomist, for he belonged to no school, but rather that Cusanus' teachings are harmonious with scholastic philosophy to a greater extent than has generally been acknowledged. It is possible to give a conservative reading of the doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* which does not represent a radical break away from this tradition or from Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction. Cusanus was neither a nominalist nor a sceptic, and his rejection was only of certain aspects of the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition as taught in the universities. Especially in his later treatises, Cusanus went to great lengths to try to integrate the Aristotelian philosophy into his theology.

However, the task of harmonizing reason with the dictates of the Catholic faith involves substantial hurdles. Our study of *Idiota de mente* brought to light the significance of Cusanus' reflections on the nature of faith as innate religion (*connata religio*), and of his model of mind as *vis iudiciaria*. On this model, the mind is neither a *tabula rasa* at birth, nor replete with inborn concepts, but rather is concreated with a power of judgment which requires actualization through contact with sensible images in order to

produce concepts. The key link with faith here lies in the mind's being a junction between God and creation. When mind reflects on its own structure, it realizes that because its operation is the formation of concepts, it is incapable of delimiting itself conceptually; therefore, that by virtue of which it is able to conceptualize all things in creation must be something beyond mind—the necessarily infinite and eternal Exemplar of which it is an image. It is in this way that reflection on the mind's structure leads one to find that our power of judgment is innate faith, i.e., that it is only by virtue of an intuitive awareness of its divine source that the mind is able to operate.

While the roots of these ideas are scholastic and Augustinian, Cusanus goes perhaps further than any before him towards successfully demonstrating the necessary role of faith in knowledge, when “faith” is taken in an abstract manner as a condition of possibility of understanding; yet this cannot be conceived of in concrete terms as the articles of the Christian faith. Consequently, Cusanus tends to skirt the issue of dogmatic faith. And necessarily so: for although the ultimate success of his attempt to conjoin faith and reason rests upon his ability to show a necessary connection between this epistemological faith and the contents of Scripture, nevertheless Cusanus cannot seek to *prove* such a connection, as a faith proven would be no faith at all. In this respect, he is obliged to leave a certain distance between these two aspects, or types of faith. Thus, while he can (and does) attempt to prove the existence of a kind of faith as *vis iudiciaria*, the most he can do regarding the faith of Scripture is appeal to empirical evidence in support of its plausibility, e.g., the reports of “reliable” witnesses.

At the same time, this unavoidable gap between dogmatic and philosophical faith remains naggingly problematic from the perspective of reason, and Cusanus' enthusiastic assurances in Book III, chapter 4 of *De docta ignorantia* that anyone who had followed his argumentation thus far regarding the nature of the absolute and contracted Maximum would surely not hesitate to assent that this must be none other than Jesus Christ are belied by the fact that his investigations into the relation of faith and reason increase in detail and complexity through his very latest works. It is evident that Cusanus strongly desired to provide a watertight case for the rational necessity of the Christian faith. Thus he sought, especially in his Brixen sermons, to demonstrate that human understanding is *only* explicable on the presupposition of the truth of the Faith. Here he no longer focused on what might compel one to take a “leap of faith”, but rather on

showing that one has always already taken that leap, and in fact takes it in every act of understanding. Unable to prove the Faith, he sought instead to prove that we are all, 'structurally', as it were, Christians.

Throughout his predicative career, Cusanus refined this theory of faith as inherent to the power of judgment in an attempt to integrate the epistemological and dogmatic senses of faith to the greatest extent possible, and to answer those questions left open by the treatises. A model emerges in the later sermons, parallel to the *vis iudiciaria*, of faith as intellect *in potentia*. Here Cusanus presented faith as the actualizing force of the latent or potential intellect in man. Faith is present in every mind, but remains itself in a certain state of potency until actualized through the mind's active turning towards its origin—the full actualization which occurs only in an inward intellectual vision of Christ. Cusanus tries thereby to strengthen the role of faith in the knowledge process by showing not only that it is latent in the structure of mind (as a presupposition of the intellect), but that the intellect cannot truly fulfill its own nature without an active turning in faith. Ultimately, however, since even this is more a movement of recognition than assent, Cusanus' model of the faith-reason dialectic, as developed in the sermons, remains highly intellectual.

Cusanus believed that the above model secured and strengthened the Christian Faith—protecting the integrity of the *mysteria fidei* while demonstrating their profoundly intelligible nature. However, in his notion of faith as an act of intellectual assent based on an inward recognition, the elements of passivity and credulity are significantly diminished, and the notions of revelation and grace are completely immanized. In a certain respect, Cusanus' account of faith and reason is a victim of its own success: it so adequately accounts for the role of a kind of faith in the knowledge-process on purely philosophical grounds that there is no gap left for Christian dogma to fill. As such, although the the articles of faith may be compatible with the abstract features of epistemological faith, Scripture has a certain redundancy with respect to this account. On the other hand, to the extent that his investigation of the conditions of possibility of knowledge demonstrated that, at a fundamental level, we are all believers in Truth, he succeeded in showing that *fides* and *ratio* are inextricably interwoven.

In trying to solve an essentially theological problem, Cusanus arrived at a highly significant philosophical achievement: that of a model of mind as the faculty of judgment. Insofar as this faculty is empty until actualized through the input of sensory data which is then in-formed by the



mind's conceptualizing or assimilative power, this model may be seen to anticipate Kant. Perhaps even more significant is the mode of reasoning by which he arrives at this model—a mode whereby one begins with the evident phenomena of sense perception and reasons backwards (*anterioriter*) through analysis of their structure to their necessary ultimate cause. It is in his application of this mode of reasoning and argumentation—a mode which may fairly be called transcendental—that one of Cusanus' most significant and intriguing philosophical contributions lies. For the inevitable conclusion of any such process of transcendental reasoning must, according to Cusanus, be the assertion of the mind's indissoluble connection to an infinite and eternal source.

Previous scholarly efforts to study faith and reason in Cusanus have often laboured to present a theory of faith and reason that shows the Cardinal *successfully* resolving the tension between philosophy and Christian theology—either by subsuming the philosophical within the theological or the theological within the philosophical, or by seeking to hold the two in some external balance. However, such a resolution cannot be made except at the cost of a certain distortion. Indeed, it is unlikely that Cusanus would have succeeded in resolving an issue that plagued all of medieval philosophy, and his own frustrated efforts to apply his teachings to concrete issues during his lifetime little attest to such success. Cusanus did produce a consistent, fully-developed theory of the *fides-ratio* dialectic, but could not resolve certain tensions between the epistemological and dogmatic notions of faith. As a result his doctrine satisfied neither the defenders of scholastic Aristotelianism nor the proponents of an increasingly popular fideistic approach to theology. The most accurate representation of Cusanus' doctrine of faith and reason thus is one that contains certain irreconcilable tensions—neither fruitful nor intentional, but in the end simply problematic, from either a philosophical or a theological point of view. Nevertheless, the positive achievements of his doctrine are considerable, and constitute a rich and fascinating inheritance for philosophers and theologians alike.



## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX ONE

### CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF LETTERS AND WORKS RELATED TO THE “TEGERNSEE” DEBATE ON MYSTICAL THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

1451	Waging writes his <i>Laudatorium doctae ignorancie</i>
February 25, 1451	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, complaining about Cusanus' legation
Before September 22, 1452	Letter of Aindorffer to Cusanus consulting the latter on matters of mystical theology, on behalf of Tegernsee Brothers
Brixen, September 22, 1452	Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer replying to Aindorffer's question
June 12, 1453	Letter of Aggsbach to Schlitpacher containing treatise <i>contra</i> Gerson
September 14, 1453	Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer and the monks of Tegernsee indicating has read Aggsbach's treatise against Gerson; stating his disagreement with Aggsbach; long discussion of mystical theology and Dionysius
October 9? (Sexta ante Colomanni), 1453	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher expounding on correct way to mystical theology
Between January 15 and February 12, 1454	Letter of Aindorffer to Cusanus thanking him for and praising <i>De visione Dei</i> ; saying that brothers are copying it and <i>De pace fidei</i> and requesting new translation of Dionysius, Eusebius, and some other texts; also requesting <i>De beryllo</i> and <i>De mathematicis complementis</i>
Before February 12, 1454	Letter of Bernard to Cusanus sending Sprenger's <i>Elucidatorium</i> and requesting new translation of Dionysius, Eusebius, <i>De beryllo</i> , and <i>De mathematicis complementis</i> , promised by Cusanus

---

<sup>1</sup> Schlitpacher himself appended a list of the order of the main components of this debate, with some explanatory notes, in his collection of the letters, to which the 18th-century librarian at Melk Leopold Wydemann then appended a further list. These are edited in Pez (1729), p. 342; and translated below, cf. Appendix 8. As neither of these mentions all of the relevant letters, I have sought to expand the list in the above table (which, however, makes no claim to completeness).

- February 12, 1454 Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer sending Dionysius translation and *De mathematicis complementis*; also making remarks on intellective nature of mystical theology
- Between February 12 and March 18, 1454 Letter of Bernard to Cusanus thanking latter for recently sent writings; making comments arguing for more affective approach to mystical theology than Cusanus promotes
- Brixen, March 18, 1454 Letter of Cusanus to Bernard responding to latter's comments on mystical theology and disagreeing with him
- July 15, 1454 Letter of Geisenfeld to Schlitpacher relating Cusanus' response to Melk prior's request (*via* Geisenfeld) for commentaries on Dionysius as well as for Cusanus' opinion about Vincent's treatise *contra* Gerson; also includes copy of *De visione Dei* and promises to send Sprenger's *Elucidatorium*
- August 16, 1454 Letter of Cusanus to Bernard asking for the prayers of the brothers that he be "freed from the disorders of the world"; announces intention to make a book of his sermons
- Before September 9, 1454 Letter of Bernard to Cusanus thanking him for books sent; expressing pleasure that happy Cusanus liked his *Laudatorium*, which he plans to augment and improve; long excursus on detached life in response to Cusanus' request (Vansteenberghe [1915], pp. 143–148; "Correspondance" no. 25)
- September 9, 1454 Letter of Cusanus to Bernard expressing desire to give up bishopric in Brixen
- December 19, 1454 Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher containing *Impugnatorium*
- May 25, 1455 Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher complaining about election of Calixtus III and Cusanus' cardinalate
- July 28, 1455 Letter of Cusanus to Bernard saying that he read Sprenger's *Elucidatorium* and liked it; further defending intellective mystical theology
- September 27, 1455 Letter of Vincent to Geisenfeld including refutation of Sprenger's *Elucidatorium*
- 1455 Letter of Vincent probably to Schlitpacher further criticizing Sprenger and "Gerchumar" and defending Hugh of Balma

January 9, 1456	Letter of Cusanus to Aindorffer saying he will have volume of his sermons copied as soon as possible
March 8? (Secunda post Laetare), 1456	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher saying that sacking of Constantinople by Turks is Church's punishment for overthrowing power of council
September 11? (feria sexta post Nativitatem B. Marie), 1456	Letter of Sprenger to Schlitpacher with <i>Complement</i> to his <i>Apologia</i>
1459	Waging's <i>Defensorium laudatorii docte ignorancie</i>
June 26, 1459	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher attacking Cusanus for betraying the Council and accusing him of corruption
August 26, 1459	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher containing his <i>Replicatio</i> , attacking Bernard's <i>Defensorium</i>
1459	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher on child pilgrimages in Europe, with discussion of mystical theology and references to Cusanus and learned ignorance
1459	Letter of Vincent of Aggsbach to John Schlitpacher of Weilheim on whether all seven gifts of the holy spirit exist in men through love
1459	Letter of Bernard to Schlitpacher responding to Vincent's attack on <i>Defensorium</i>
1459?	Letter of Bernard to Schlitpacher further responding to Vincent's attack on <i>Defensorium</i>
December 1, 1459	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher further criticizing Bernard's <i>Laudatorium</i> and <i>Defensorium</i>
December 13? (Sabbato post Lucia), 1459	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher further attacking Bernard
1459	Bernard's treatise <i>De cognoscendo Deum</i>
May 25, 1460	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher attacking Sprenger's <i>Apologia</i>
Undated	Letter of Carthusian prior Thomas Papler to Schlitpacher expressing concern about Vincent's involvement in debate and urging Schlitpacher to discontinue correspondence with Vincent
September 25, 1460	Schlitpacher writes letter to Marquard, defending Vincent
September 29? (Die 8. Michaelis), 1460	Letter of Vincent to Schlitpacher, sending back Marquard's treatises, and saying he wants to end debate



- c. 1460 Geisenfeld's *Strictilogium de mystica theologia*,  
a brief account of the controversy surrounding  
Cusanus' *De docta ignorantia*
- 1463 Schlitpacher's treatise *Tractatus de contemplatione*
- 1463/64 Bernard's treatise *De spiritualibus sentimentis et per-  
fectione spirituali*

## APPENDIX TWO

### EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF EXCERPT FROM JOHANNES WENCK'S LETTER TO JOHN OF GELNHAUSEN, 1442 (WENCK'S SUMMARY OF THE 17 'PROPOSALS' OF HANS FRANCKFURTER)<sup>1</sup>

Quarum prima haec est: Ordinem approbatum et per regem romanorum consultum respui.

2a: Propositum meum est effici silvae frater, vulgariter "waltbruder".

3a: Ad hoc propositum perceptibiliter sentio me per deum attractum.

4ta: Christi ymitatorem sive sectatorem sua desideria oportet amplius quam a tristitia absolutare, vulgariter "ledigsten",<sup>2</sup> quamvis hoc difficulter, cum multis mortibus, adipiscatur.

The first of these is this: I rejected the order approved and sanctioned by the king of the Romans.

2nd: My proposal is to become a brother of the woods, in the vernacular, a "waltbruder".

3rd: To this proposal I sense myself perceptibly drawn by God.

4th: It is necessary for the imitator or follower of Christ to be freed—in the vernacular, "stand apart"—from his desire even more than from his sadness, although this is attained with difficulty and with many deaths.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on Ms. Cod. 190 [Stadtbibliothek Mainz], f. 150v, 5–151v, 19.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1955 study of the Cusanus-Wenck debate, Rudolf Haubst translates the mittelhochdeutsch "ledigsten", which is what actually appears in the manuscript, as "ledigsein", saying that the former was certainly a copiest error (cf. Haubst [1955], p. 115 n. 6). In his later edition of this text (Cf. Haubst [1958], pp. 377–378), he chose to replace "ledigsten" with "legisten", however with no explanation as to why. As 'ledig sten' is however a well-documented verb in Mittelhochdeutsch literature (for example, it is found in Johannes Tauler: "min selbs ledig sten" [cf. *Die deutsche Litteratur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon*. Bd. 9. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995, p. 660.], and as its meaning (equivalent to the modern German "ledig stehen") which is 'to stand apart', or 'be detached from', is most certainly the sense intended in this passage, I have retained it as written. (The expression 'ledig sten' is also found in the works of late-15th century preacher Johannes Geiler von Kayserberg, again, in the sense of detachment from worldly involvement and concern; for example in an excerpt from the 1501 text *Trostspiegel*: "Der erst schad ist / liebe zu dyser welt / das ist zu zytlichem gut / eren gewalt würdikeyten / dar zu neygenend uns dick unser fründ rotten / und helffend dar zu / das uns oft dient zu unser grosse verderbniß / an sel und an lyb / welcher ding ettwan ein frumm gut hertz / *ledig sten* mocht / aber er muß synen fründen volgen al ser went und dar sy nit erzürnen / dar an er sich doch nit keren soll." [my italics] Bauer, G., ed. *Johannes Geiler von Kayserberg. Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. 1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989, p. 223.

5ta: Exoro deum, et alios orare pro me rogo deum impertiri mihi gratiam perficiendi huius modi dilectissimum velle.

6ta: Ad huius modi propositum perficiendum necesse est mihi cottidie mori (perficere nequeo cum multitudo, cum mundo, etiam cum temporalibus rebus et negotiis) et discere mori.

7ma: Talis modi mori perficere nequeo cum multitudo, cum mundo, etiam cum temporalibus rebus et negotiis.

Octava: Ut efficiar verus martir et secutor Christi, recommendari cupio precibus amicorum Dei, ut redeam ad principium.

Nona: Credo in veritate et non sum dubius: „wage ich mich ante Christum unsern herren, er waget sich an mich“.

Decima: Frater, huic proposito nolite adversari nec aliquam suscipiatis persuasionem periti vel imperiti resistendi.

Undecima: Qui non “waget und suchet”, nunquam veniet ad id, ad quod Deus eum libenter habere vult.

Duodecima: Intrare in se ipsum humiliat et “furtheret dahin”, unde venistis.

Tredecima: Date omne temporalitate ex toto licentiam intrando interiore hominem forte dabit vobis Deus unum opus quod bene habetis agere.

XIVa: Ad huius modi propositum homines me non induxerunt.

5th: I entreat God and ask others to pray for me, that God will impart to me the grace to accomplish this kind of most delightful wish.

6th: For this way of accomplishing the proposal, it is necessary for me daily to die (I cannot accomplish [this] amongst the multitude, in the world, and amongst temporal things and occupations) and to learn to die.

7th: I cannot accomplish such a manner of dying amongst the multitude, in the world, and amongst temporal things and occupations.

8th: In order for me to become a true martyr and follower of Christ, I long to be recommended by the prayers of the friends of God, so that I may be returned to the origin.

9th: I believe in truth and do not doubt that: “if I venture forth to Christ our Lord, he will venture forth to me”.

10th: Brother, do not oppose this proposal nor try any means of persuading the experienced or inexperienced to resist it.

11th: Who does not “venture and seek” will never arrive at that which God freely wanted him to have.

12th: To enter into oneself makes one humble and “helps you to get” whence you came. [i.e., helps you to arrive at the origin, from whence you came]

thirteenth: Having relinquished all temporal things, God perhaps may give you permission by entering the interior man to do well the work which you have to do.

fourteenth: To this kind of proposal men did not lead me.

XVa: In hoc proposito scientifici maxime fuerunt contra me, a quibus passus sum obprobriosa verba, et merito, quia haec ad haec subserviunt.

XVIa: Desidero propter Deum ad huius modi propositum laudabile per vos promoveri et vestros amicos “wol gelebten”, quibus me commendetis, ubi eos sciveritis.

XVIIa: Non veniant de cetero amici mei ad me. Facio sicut essem “von ziit” nec poterunt habere [Ms: haberi] a me consolationem temporalem.

fifteenth: Regarding this proposal, the scholars were most opposed to me, from whom I suffered insulting words, and rightly so, because these [words] served this [proposal] [i.e., increased my conviction to lead a life of detachment].

16th: For the sake of God I wish to be promoted to this laudable kind of proposal by you and your “well-loved” friends, by which you would commend me, where you would have known them.

17th: Furthermore, my friends would not come to me. I [must] act as though I would be “divorced from temporal concerns”, nor can they have temporal consolation from me.

APPENDIX THREE

TRANSLATION OF EXCERPT FROM LETTER OF VINCENT OF  
AGGSBACH TO JOHN SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM),  
FEBRUARY 25, 1451<sup>1</sup>

Remitto copiam decreti Nicolai Chusa, de quo decreto 'nihil' boni 'fiet'; Eze. De ipso namque habeo coniecturas multas, nullas tamen bonas, quas tamen nolo litteris commendare. Si cardinalis ille Nicholas est ille Chusa, de quo Eneas vertit figuram 'Dyalogi' sui, inter ipsum videlicet et quondam Stephanum Nouariensem, tunc non est mihi spes, quod per talem fistulam unquam bonus concentus ecclesiam letificans possit formari. Quod si ille est, tunc quid significet ipsius creacio vel assumpcio in cardinalem, quid reformatio religionum in Alemannia per eundem procuranda, quid denique gracia iubilei noviter data vel danda, eciam mediocriter intelligens poterit faciliter intueri. Est enim et erit totum 'negocium in tenebris perambulans'. Scriptum per fr. Vincentium in Axpach.

I send back the copy of the decree of Nicholas of Cusa, of which decree nothing good will come. For in fact I have many conjectures about him, none of which are good, which I nevertheless do not wish to commit to writing. If that cardinal Nicholas is the Cusa whom Aeneas [i.e., Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini] depicts in his 'Dialogue' evidently between him and Stephan of Novara, then I have no hope that from such a pipe a good melody pleasing to the church could ever be formed. If that is him, then what would signify his creation or ascension to cardinal, what [would signify] the reformation of the religious in Germany, which would be managed by this same [Cusa]. Likewise, even someone of mediocre intelligence can easily intuit what [will happen with] the dispensation of the jubilee indulgences recently given or [still] to be given. For it is and will be entirely "the business that walketh in the dark". Written by brother Vincent in Aggsbach.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on ed. *Acta Cusana*, nr. 1057, pp. 759–760. Text previously edited in Pez [1759], pp. 327–328.

#### APPENDIX FOUR

### TRANSLATION OF EXCERPT FROM THE IMPUGNATORIUM LAUDATORII IN LETTER OF VINCENT OF AGGSBACH TO JOHN SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM), DEC. 19, 1454<sup>1</sup>

Moyseſ famuluſ dum loquebatur populo Iſrael, ut habetur Deuteronomio 4: ‘acceſſiſtiſ ad radiceſ montiſ qui ardebat uſque ad celum, erantque in eo tenebre, nubes et caligo; locuſtuſque eſt dominuſ ad voſ de medio igniſ. Vocem verborum eiſ auditiſti et formam penituſ non viditiſti’. Et infra: ‘Non viditiſti aliquam ſimilitudinem in die qua locuſtuſ eſt dominuſ vobiſ in Oreſ de medio igniſ, ne forte decepti faciatiſ vobiſ ſculptam ſimilitudinem aut ymaginem maſculi ſeu femine etc.’. Sicut ergo video, prohibite ſunt omnium rerum ſimilitudineſ et ymagineſ; ſic miſtico diſcipulo ultra predicta deſerende rerum et occultande ſunt ymagineſ intelligibilium, velut patet per duo ultima capitula *Miſtiche theologie* per totum. Quemadmodum autem populo Iuderorum poſt apparicionem et allocucionem divinam fabricatuſ fuit ydolum, ſic pari modo miſtico diſcipulo qui omnia ſenſibilia et intelligibilia etc. relinquere iubetur, fabricatuſ eſt ydolum, cuiuſ nomen eſt *eycona*. Que, rogo, ſunt hec mirabilia? Vult Chu[ſa] per ſenſibilem ymaginem introducere ad miſticam theologiam,

Moſeſ, the obedient, when ſpeaking to the people of Iſrael, aſ it iſ ſaid in Deuteronomy 4:11 [ſaid]: “You approached the baſe of the mountain which burned all the way to heaven, and there waſ darkneſſ in it, a cloud and obſcurity; and the lord ſpoke to you from the miſt of the fire. You heard the ſound of hiſ wordſ but did not ſee any form at all”. And below: “You did not ſee any ſimilitude on the day that the lord ſpoke to you in Oreſ from the miſt of the fire, leſt perhaps being deceived you would make for yourſelveſ a graven ſimilitude or image of a man or a woman, etc.”. Juſt aſ therefore I ſee that the ſimilitudeſ and imageſ of all thingſ are prohibited, ſo the miſtic diſciple muſt abandon thingſ beyond thoſe already mentioned and imageſ of intelligibleſ muſt be hidden [from him], juſt aſ iſ made clear by the whole laſt two chapterſ of the *Miſtical Theology*. However juſt aſ an idol waſ made by the Jewiſh people after the apparition and divine addreſſ, ſo in the very ſame way iſ an idol made—whoſe name iſ *Icons*—by the miſtic diſciple who waſ ordered to relinquish all ſenſible and intelligible

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on ed. Vanſteenberghe [1915], pp. 204–212 (hiſ edition based on Ms. Cod. Mellic. 59, ff. 113–116v).

in cuius introduccione nec Dei quidem nec alicuius creature quantumcumque nobilis permittitur haberi memoria.

Intitulavit libellum quem fecit occasione illius ymaginis *De visione Dei*, iustius autem intituloisset ipsum <de docta ignorancia> vel <de ignota doctrina>. Non tamen simpliciter improbo dictum libellum, quia valet contemplatori. Valet etiam mystico discipulo pro via illuminativa, sed pro unitiva nequaquam.

Miror valde de tam laudabili et probo viro Marquardo, quod contra doctrinam sapientis quesivit impietatem in domo iusti, reddendo scripta Hugonis suspecta, dum dicit ea caute esse legenda, ac dum asserit ea errori Grecorum favere. Non est apud me ullum dubium, quin multi doctissimi viri, sicut dominus Cancellarius et alii, legerint opusculum Hugonis de Palma, et tamen nullus hucusque talia fecit vel de eis sic sensit sicut ipse. Credo Hugonem non ignorasse Deum patrem esse inensum, inensum filium, inensumque spiritum sanctum, et opera sanctissime Trinitatis ad extra fore indivisa, et alia plura, in quibus eum notavit.

things etc. What, I ask, are these astonishing things? Chusa wants to introduce [one] to mystical theology through a sensible image, in whose introduction a monument is not permitted to be possessed, indeed neither of God nor of any creature however noble.

He entitled the little book, which he made on the occasion of [having made] that image, *De visione Dei*, although he would have more justly titled it *De docta ignorancia* or *De ignota doctrina*. Nevertheless I do not simply condemn the aforementioned little book, because it is helpful to the contemplator. Likewise it is helpful to the mystic disciple for the illuminative way, but by no means for the unitive way.

I greatly wonder about so praiseworthy and honest a man as Marquard, that against the doctrine of the wise, he sought impiety in the house of the just, by rendering suspect the writings of Hugh [of Balma], in saying that they should be read with caution, and alleging that they favour the error of the Greeks. I have no doubt that many most learned men, such as the lord Chancellor [i.e., Gerson] and others, have read the little work of Hugh of Balma, and nevertheless none [of them] so far has made or thought such things about it as him [Marquard]. I believe that Hugh was not ignorant that God the father is immeasurable, that the son is immeasurable, and that the Holy Spirit is immeasurable, and that the works of the most Holy Trinity directed to the outside would be indivisible, and the many other things, in which he [Marquard] mentioned him [Hugh].

Videtur michi quod tota trinitas personarum in Gerchumar comprehensa in hoc erret quod mysticam theologiam, quam Dyonisius sapienciam christianorum appellat, credat solum esse sapienciam donum, cuius actus secundum doctores partim est cognitivus et partim affectivus, ita quod in cognitione inchoatur et in affectione consummatur, et sic in eo cognitio natura precederet affectionem.

Prima persona trinitatis, scilicet Gerson, aperte hoc dicit in suo libello *De mystica theologia*, capitulo finali vel antifinali. Dicit enim eam esse sapienciam que inter dona reponitur, sicut in collacionibus meis potest videri.

Similiter secunda persona, scilicet Chu[s]a, est eiusdem credulitatis, ut habetur in epistola sua missa in Tegernsee. Et in *Laudatorio* sue *Docte ignorancie* scribit auctor, quicumque sit ille, hoc modo, quasi in fine primi folii: «Sapiencia enim in se claudit actum utrumque, quia respicit tam intellectum quam ipsum affectum, quia nemo ex hoc solum est sapiens quod amat, nisi etiam ulterius cognoscat», et concludit: «Nunquam igitur est amor sine cognitione, ordinata lege manente». Hec ille. Et puto ipsum *Laudatorium* omnino esse excerptum, saltem pro maiori parte, ex libris *Docte ignorancie*, in quo *Laudatorio* legi quedam que michi horrorem, stuporem et horripilationem fecerunt, que sunt ista: «Inter doctam ignoranciam et mysticam theologiam coincidencia seu conveniencia clara videtur; sed neque minorem

It seems to me that the whole trinity of persons contained in “Gerchumar”,<sup>2</sup> err in this, that it [i.e., the trinity “Gerchumar”] believes the mystical theology, which Dionysius calls the wisdom of Christians, to be only the wisdom of the gifts whose act, according to the doctors, is partly cognitive and partly affective; so that it begins in cognition and is consummated in affection, and so in it cognition would naturally precede affection.

The first person of the trinity, namely Gerson, clearly states this in his little book *On Mystical Theology*, in the final or penultimate chapter. For he says it to be the wisdom which belongs among the gifts, just as can be seen in my notes.

Similarly the second person, namely Chusa, is of the same belief, as can be grasped in his letter sent to Tegernsee. And in the *Laudatorium* of his *Docta ignorancia*, the author—whoever this may be—writes in this way, near the end of the first folio: “Now wisdom includes within itself both acts, because it concerns the intellect just as much as the affect itself, because no one is wise only because he loves, unless he furthermore knows”, and he concludes: “Therefore there is never love without cognition, so long as the ordained law remains”. This is what he says. And I suppose that *Laudatorium* to be entirely an excerpt, at least for the most part, from the books of the *Docta Ignorancia*, in which *Laudatorium* I read certain [things] which created in me horror, stupor, and hair-raising terror, which are these: “Between learned

<sup>2</sup> I.e., *De visione Dei*.



vel forte maiorem cum speculativa seu contemplativa ipsa docta ignorancia convenienciam habet, ut patet consideranti; quin certe et verius velut in circulo brevi omnem prorsus theologiam, simul cum methaphysica mathematicam in se complectitur ac complicat, ut non desit quidquam Deum pie querenti et devote credenti, quin tandem aliquando per doctam ignoranciam ipsum feliciter attingat. Hec est enim sine qua Deus recte non queritur, qua neglecta vel deficiente per devia itur, qua sola dirigente atque tuente verius ac cicius invenitur.' Et aliquibus interpositis ita dicit: 'Itaque omnium sapientum et sanctorum veterum et modernorum doctrina deficit in eis ad que docta ignorancia sacra suum cultorem transmittit'. Hec ibi.

Que sunt rogo ista monstra verborum? In primis dicit mysticam theologiam de qua plura falsa premiserat et doctam ignoranciam coincidere et convenire; et statim subiungit ipsam doctam ignoranciam non minorem vel forte maiorem cum speculativa seu contemplativa theologia habere convenienciam, et quod omnem theologiam, methaphysicam ac mathematicam in se complectatur. Mira res. Utique si methaphysice et mathematice auctor est Aristoteles, tunc naturalem convenienciam habere possunt cum mystica theologia. Et si docta ignorancia convenit cum utrisque partibus, iam sapientia divina et humana concordiam inierunt, ut sapientia huius mundi iam non sit amplius stulticia apud Deum.

ignorance and mystical theology a clear coincidence or agreement is apparent; but it [i.e., mystical theology] has neither lesser nor perhaps greater agreement with speculative or contemplative learned ignorance itself, as is clear to one who considers it; rather it contains and enfolds in itself certainly and more truly like in a small circle, absolutely all of theology and mathematics, together with metaphysics; so that one who piously seeks God and devoutly believes lacks nothing, so that finally at some time he happily attains him [i.e., God] through learned ignorance. For this is that without which God is not correctly sought, [it is that] which if neglected or lacking one goes astray, and [when it] alone directs and guides [God] is found more truly and more quickly." And after having added some other things he thus says: "And so the doctrine of all the sages and of both the ancient and the modern saints fails in those things to which the sacred learned ignorance transmits its follower. These [things he says] there.

What, I ask, are these monstrous words? First he says that mystical theology—about which he begins by saying many falsities—and learned ignorance coincide and agree; and he adds immediately that learned ignorance is no less or indeed more in agreement with speculative or contemplative theology, and that all theology, metaphysics as well as mathematics is enfolded therein. These things are astonishing. And if the author of metaphysics and mathematics is indeed Aristotle, then these can have a natural agreement with mystical theology. And if learned ignorance agrees with both of these parts, then divine and human wisdom fall in agreement, such that the wisdom of this world would no longer be more foolish than God's.

Deinde supra omnem doctrinam extollit doctam ignoranciam, dicens doctrinam omnium sapientum et sanctorum veterum et modernorum deficere in eis ad que ipsa suum cultorem transmittit. Si per veteres et modernos sapientes et sanctos intelligit patres utriusque testamenti vel solum novi testamenti, non potest terra sustinere sermones istos et destitucione potius agendum esset contra eos quam disputacione. Iam primo verificata esset propheta Ysaie: «Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam; habitantibus in regione umbre mortis lux orta est eis». Iam primo esset «tempus acceptabile et dies salutis etc.», quia dicit ille laudator quod sine docta ignorancia Deus recte non queritur, et ea neglecta vel deficiente per devia itur. Ergo erravimus omnes ab inicio mundi, qui docte ignorancie nec nomen audivimus. Recurrendum est omnibus modis ad doctrinam illius quem dilexit Ihesus, scilicet Iohannis evangeliste, qui dicit: «Probate spiritus si ex Deo sunt». Spiritu sancto inspirati homines ab inicio mundi locuti sunt «non in persuasibilibus humane sapientie verbis etc.». Iste autem *Docte Ignorancie* auctor aliter procedit, scilicet in sublimitate sermonum, sicut in *Eycona*<sup>3</sup> et in quodam *dyalogo inter oratorem et ydiotam* et in *Laudatorio* de quo nunc sermo, quod non nisi excerptum

Then he extols learned ignorance above all doctrines, saying that the doctrine of all the sages as well as of both the ancient and the modern saints lacks that to which it [learned ignorance] transmits its followers. Whether or not by ancient and modern sages and saints he understands the Fathers of both the Testaments or only of the New Testament, the ground cannot sustain these statements, and it would be better to counter them with rejection than with disputation. For, as such, the prophecy of Isaiah: “The people who walked in the darkness saw a great light; to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen”, would be verified for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Likewise for the first time it would be “the acceptable time and the day of salvation, etc.”,<sup>5</sup> because that praiser [i.e., Bernard of Waging] says that without learned ignorance God is not correctly sought, and by neglecting or falling away from it one goes astray. Therefore all of us have erred from the beginning of the world, who did not hear the name of learned ignorance. One must return in every way to the doctrine of that one who was beloved of Jesus, namely of John the Evangelist, who said: “Test the spirits whether they are from God”. Men inspired by the Holy Spirit have since the beginning of the world spoken “not in

<sup>3</sup> “Gerchumar” is a fictitious name created by Aggsbach, enfolding the “trinity” of Gerson, C[h]usa, and Marquard Sprenger, whom Aggsbach considers to represent the same doctrine and approach to mystical theology. They form the collective object of his attack in this letter.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isaiah 9:2.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 6:2.

ex *Docta ignorantia* autumo, perpendere potui.

Pariter dicit quod in scriptis Dyonisij et Gregorij sparsim non inveniatur, nisi quod rara verba, scilicet coincidentiam, possibilitatem et necessitatem, implicationem, complicationem, explicacionem sibi assumit; ex quibus elicio ipsum alium spiritum habuisse quam prophete, apostoli et doctores.

Item, ipse restitit et hodie resistit Spiritui Sancto, Spiritus enim sanctus congregaverat concilium Basiliense, quod ipse pro viribus dissipavit, quam dissipationem et cuncta que contra ecclesiam fecit, ut a viro fide digno percepi, hodie iustificare non cessat. Non ergo sapit michi doctrina per tale organum emanata, nec puto eius inspirationem Sanctum Spiritum fore.

Item, idem auctor est vir magnus corpore, magnus animo, magnus scientia, magna eloquencia, magnus in beneficijs, pinguis in divicijs, altus in honoribus; iam per edicionem nove doctrine intendit meo videre acquirere gloriam de nomine sanctitatis. Custodiat me dominus et unumquemque fidelem ab ista nova peregrina doctrina!

[...]

the persuasive words of human wisdom, etc.”<sup>6</sup> However this author of *Learned Ignorance* proceeds otherwise, namely with lofty speech, as I was able to assess in *Icons* and in a certain *Dialogue between an orator and an idiot*<sup>7</sup> and in the *Laudatorium* of which I now speak, which I judge to be just excerpts from *Learned Ignorance*.

Equally, he says that it [i.e., the doctrine of learned ignorance] would be not seldom found in the writings of Dyonisius and Gregory, were it not for the unusual words he [i.e., Cusanus] had used, namely coincidence, possibility, and necessity, implication, complication, and explication; from which I conclude him to have had a spirit other than that which the prophets, apostles, and doctors had.

Likewise he quashed and [still] today resists the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit had united the council of Basel, which used his powers to dissolve—which dissolution and everything that he did against the church, as I learned from a trustworthy man, he does not cease to justify today. This doctrine therefore does not seem to me [like something that] emerged from such an instrument, nor do I suppose its inspiration was from the Holy Spirit.

Likewise the same author is a man of great body, great soul, great science, great eloquence, rich in benefices, fat in riches, elevated in honours; yet through the publication of the new doctrine it appears to me that he intends to obtain the glory of a holy name. Lord protect me and every one of the faithful from this strange new doctrine!

[...]

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:4

<sup>7</sup> Namely, Cusanus' treatise *Idiota de sapientia*.

Volunt ergo omnes persone vestre trinitatis id quod est occultissimum et singularissimum, et per consequens paucorum, redigere ad id quod est manifestum commune et multorum. Tota autem diversitas pendet solum in prioritate et posterioritate cognitionis, que in dono precedit et concomitatur, in mystice theologia sequitur affectum. Hi ultimum nec experiuntur nec volunt credere, sed conantur violenter reducere ad primum; nec dignantur textus Dionysij diligenter sed truncate inspicere, et ipsos quantum valent suis ratiunculis enervare nituntur. Posset tamen meo videre ista diversitas sic excludi si poneretur Deum, cuius sapientie non est numerus, nec est unam tantum sapientiam habens, talibus electis et dilectis ad mystice theologie consecutionem speciale donum sapientie impertiri. Actus enim sapientialis doni multo plus differunt ab actibus mystice sapientie quam ab actibus donorum intellectus, scientie et consilii, quia in actibus sapientie doni intellectus precedit vel ad minus concomitatur affectum, et sic ambo collaborant in suis actibus; in actibus vero mystice sapientie intellectus relinquitur, obscuratur, nec permittitur in actum exire.

Therefore all persons of your trinity want to reduce that which is most hidden and most singular and as a consequence for the few, to that which is manifest commonly and to the many. However all the difference depends solely on the priority and posteriority of cognition, which precedes and accompanies in the gift, and in mystical theology is followed by affect. They do not experience this latter nor do they want to believe it, but they endeavour violently to reduce [it] to the first; nor are the texts of Dionysius duly appreciated, but they try to inspect them cursorily, and as far as they can with their trifling account to weaken them. Nevertheless, as far as I see, this diversity can be so excluded if [one assumes that] God, whose wisdom is not countable, nor has only one wisdom, is imparted to those elect and chosen to be able to proceed to mystical theology as a special gift of wisdom. For the acts of the gift of wisdom differ much more from the acts of mystical wisdom than from the acts of the gifts of the intellect, science and judgment, because in acts of the gift of wisdom the intellect precedes or at least accompanies the affect, and so both collaborate in their acts; however in acts of mystical wisdom the intellect is relinquished, obscured, and is not permitted to come into act.

## APPENDIX FIVE

### TRANSLATION OF EXCERPT FROM LETTER OF VINCENT OF AGGSBACH TO JOHN SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM), JUNE 26, 1459<sup>1</sup>

Fides [...] omnibus Catholicis communis est, ad cuius defensionem quilibet plus obligatur, quam ad defensionem patriae, fratrum, sororum, propriae vitae et temporalis substantiae, propriae vel communis. Hoc enim Apostolus ad Ephesios 4. insinuare videtur, cum inter alia hortatur eos servare unitatem spiritus, quae unitas rumpitur per haereticam pravitatem. Debent etiam secundum eundem Apostolum membra pro seipsis esse sollicita, ita ut quilibet fidelis, qui vult esse membrum Christi, pie sollicitetur pro proximis, ne in eis fides Catholica, quae est fundamentum charitas et omnium bonorum spiritualium corrumpatur.

Saepe, mi Pater, indignor contra vos pro eo, quod, cum habeatis dona Dei, et sitis potens in scripturis, nihil contra modernos errores zelare videmini, tanquam facta fidei ad vos minime pertineant. Sciretis enim defectus Ecclesiam modo obscurantes clare considerare, consideratos colligere, collectos in questiones et dubia formare, et de his cum doctis viris, saepe ad vos declinantibus, conferre, vel ea ad aliquos Doctores in Wiennam transmittere, ut vel declarationem facerent, vel de ipsis in suis exercitijs disputarent. Credo namque, quod Religiosus Religiosum, Clericus Clericum, Magister

The faith of every Catholic is shared, to whose defense anyone is more obligated than to the defense of a father, a brother, a sister, one's own life, and temporal substance, whether one's own or shared. For this the Apostle seems to imply in Ephesius 4, when among other things, he exhorts them to serve the unity of the spirit, which unity is corrupted by the depravity of the heretic. Likewise, according to the same Apostle, must members arouse each other, so that anyone of the faithful who wishes to be a member of Christ, piously be aroused by his neighbour, that in him the Catholic faith, which is the foundation of charity of every spiritual good, not be corrupted.

Often, my Father, I am indignant at you because—although you have the gifts of God, and have the ability to write—you do not seem to campaign against the errors of the *moderni*, as if matters of the faith were of little concern to you. For you would know the faults of the Church by means of clearly considering obfuscating [things], collecting [these] considerations and forming the collected [considerations] and doubts into questions, and conferring regarding these with learned men [who] often defer to you; or to transmit them to some Doctors in Vienna, so that they would either compose a statement or

<sup>1</sup> Based on ed. Pez [1729], pp. 337–338.

Magistrum, Doctor Doctorem, Facultas Facultatem, Universitas Universitatem, Universitates Praelatos et caeteros fideles ad zelandum pro fide sollicitare deberent.

Ex quo secundum dictum Salvatoris arbores ex fructibus debent cognosci, cum de vestro Chusa, de quo in vestris scedulis saepe mentionem fecistis et facistis, nihil laude dignum, sed solum, de quo gemendum sit, sciam, non fuit nec est necesse, de eo vel de suis opusculis toties facere mentionem. Scio namque, quod a Concilio Basileensi recessit, adversario Concilii adhaesit, Concilium impugnavit, ad Graecos legatione functus ipsos non ad Basileam, sed ad Ferrariam adduxit. Scio etiam, quod in Allemannia post iubiiaeum [sic] sub praetextu indulgentiarum pecunias congregavit, et quandam fictam et illusoriam visitationem in delusionem sacrorum generalium Conciliorum (quasi Papa sine Concilij vellet et posset Dei Ecclesiam reformare) in certis locis instituit. Quod autem aliqua monasteria sui Episcopatus visitari et reformari procuraverit, tale reputo, ac si quis, qui damnificasset proximum suum in mille talentis, pro satisfactione tres tantum denariorum solidos sibi daret. Sicut enim, meo videri, bonos homines parva mala non damnant : sic malos homines parva bona non salvant. Quod etiam scribitis, Eum in Curia esse potentem, et eandem vice et nomine Papae strenue gubernare credo, cum in diabolicis altercationibus ambiciosorum hominum tritissimus sit, utpote in his exercitatus ab adolescentia sua. Taceatis autem de hoc, quod olim misero Eugenio, qui auctoritatem generalium Conciliorum auferre conabatur,

dispute about it in their exercises. And in fact I believe that the devout must arouse the devout, the cleric the cleric, the master the master, the doctor the doctor, the faculty the faculty, the university the university, the universities the prelates, and the remaining believers must campaign for the faith.

When, according to the saying of the Lord, the tree must be known by its fruit, then I can find nothing praiseworthy about your Cusa—whom you mention so often in your letters—but only things to complain about. I know certainly that it was not necessary and is not necessary to make much fuss about him and his works. For I know that he abandoned the council of Basel, adhered to its enemy; fought the council and brought the Greeks—with whom he undertook a legation—not to Basel, but to Ferrara. Likewise I know that in Germany, after the jubilee, he accumulated money under the pretext of indulgences, and once instituted a false and illusory visitation in a certain location, in deception of the holy general Council (as if the Pope would or could reform the Church without the Council!). However he might take care that some monasteries in his bishopric be visited and reformed, such I consider as though one were to deprive his neighbour of a thousand dollars and then pay him back only three cents. For just as, in my view, a few bad things do not ruin good men, neither do a few good things save bad men. What you likewise write—that he is a powerful man in the Curia and governs it vigorously on behalf of and in the name of the Pope—I believe, as he is vile in the devilish interactions of the more ambitious men, insofar he has been trained in this from his adolescence. However, you say nothing about this, [namely] that he previously devoted his favour,

favorem auxilium et consilium in suis malis actibus impenderit : Quod etiam eius Successori Nicolao Quinto, qui non solum auctoritatem Conciliorum, verum etiam et ipsa generalia Concilia cessare in futurum et destruere satagebat, adhaeserit etc. Nolo in narrando defectus suos diutius immorari. Hoc solum dico, quod, nisi audiero Chusam pro Ecclesia Dei tanta facere bona, quanta mala contra eam fecit, vere de bonitate eius parum tenebo.

Ex praemissis, mi Pater, perpendere potestis, quid sentiam de Dorothea de Prussia et de alijs supra memoratis, quae fuerunt sine literis doctae. De quibus teneo, quod in doctrina doctae ignorantiae fuerint clarius illustratae, quam Chusa. Quarum doctrina non ex revolutione librorum, sed ex unctione, de omnibus docente, processit. Quae doctrina alijs nominibus dici potest sancta Rusticitas, paupertas Spiritus, sive simplicitas virtuosa. De hac doctrina doctae ignorantiae ipse Chusa non experientiam, sed imaginationem suam sequens scripsit. Habet enim hoc instinctus naturalis sive curiositas humana proprium, ut nota fastidiat, et semper ad rara et alta, curiosa et subtilia tendat.

Unde cum ipse Chusa habuerit et habeat multas gratias gratis datas, potuit, et hodie potest de quacunque materia, multa imaginari et fingere, et verbis humanae Sapientiae persuasibilia facere, et tandem talia redigere in Tractatus, qui tamen non ex docta

support and advice to the bad deeds of the wretched Eugene, who tried to take away the authority of the general Council. Likewise, that he adhered to his [i.e. Eugene's] successor, Nicholas V, who not only busied himself with destroying the authority of the Council, but indeed with preventing the same general Council [from reconvening] in the future, etc. I do not wish to dwell on discussion of his failings any longer. I say only this: that were I to hear that Cusa had done anything at all good for the Church, [given] how many bad things he has done against it, I would indeed consider these good things to be too few.

Based on what was said before, my Father, you can weigh what I think of Dorothy of Prussia and the others mentioned above, who became learned without letters. Regarding those I maintain that they were more clearly enlightened in the doctrine of learned ignorance than Cusa. Their doctrine proceeded not out of the turning of [the pages of] books, but from the annointment teaching about all things. This doctrine can be called by other names, [such as] holy rusticity, poverty of spirit, or skilled simplicity. Regarding this doctrine of learned ignorance, Cusa himself did not write according to experience, but according to his imagination. For natural instinct or human curiosity has the [following] property, that it disdains things [already] known, and tends always to rare and sublime curiosities and sophistries.

Thus since this Cusa had and has many graces freely given, he could and today can invent many imaginary things and make persuasive [arguments] from words of human wisdom on any subject, and finally render such things in the *Treatise* [i.e., *De docta ignorantia*]

ignorantia, sed ex naturali et subtili ingenio emanarent, quemadmodum quendam de *Mystica Theologia*, et de *Nomine Dei tetragrammaton* aliquando fecisse recorder.

Audivi a fide digno, quod audierit ipsum Chusam gemendo dixisse : *vere nescio, si in tota Ecclesia possent sex Episcopi inveniri, qui officium Episcopale fideliter exercerent*. Si est potens in Curia, ut scribitis, circa salutem populi Christiani deberet versari studium suum, et se magis cum docta iustitia quam cum docta ignorantia occupare. Sed heu lux mundi obscurata est, et sal terrae infatuatum! Optabam miserabilis et muliebris temporis finem, et virilis temporis initium vivendo experiri : sed cum deliber et tempus meae resolutionis instet, video hoc mihi datum non esse. Consuetudo est vobis in scedulis vestris frequenter ponere verba oleata; cum autem difficile sit consueta relinquere, ideo oportet me habere patientiam.

which nevertheless would not emanate from learned ignorance, but from a natural and subtle talent, just as I recall he made a certain [treatise] about the *Mystical Theology* and the *Name of God, tetragrammaton*.

I heard from a faithful, honourable man, that he heard that this Cusa is said to have groaned: "Indeed I don't know if in the whole Church six bishops could be found who faithfully exercised the Episcopal office". If he is a powerful man in the Curia, as you write, then he should turn his study to the health of the Christian people, and occupy himself more with "docta iustitia" than with "docta ignorantia". But alas, the light of the world is obscured, and the salt of the earth ridiculed! I, a wretch, wish to experience during my lifetime both the end of womanish time, and the beginning of virile time: but as I am worn away and the time of resolution approaches, I see that this is not to be given to me. It is your habit frequently to put polished words in your writings; however, as it is difficult to relinquish habit, so I must have patience.



APPENDIX SIX

TRANSLATION OF LETTER OF VINCENT OF AGGSBACH TO  
JOHN SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM), DIE 8. MICHAELIS, 1460<sup>1</sup>

Quamvis multa habuissem scribere contra tractatulos Domini Marquardi, non tamen nisi pauca scripsi: quae nolui sibi et suis communicari, non timore succumbendi sicut ipsi opinantur, sed ne multiplicationi erroneorum libellorum occasionem praeberem etc. Et infra.<sup>2</sup> Dominus Prior de Tegernsee implevit verba B. Iohannis dicentis : *Non diligamus verbo nec lingua sed opere et veritate*. Non commendat me verbis sed opere et veritate. Mutuando librum et mihi per tanta spatia terrarum mittendo : in quo mihi tantam complacentiam ostendit, quam de corde meo nulla unquam delebit oblivio etc. Et infra. Legi, vos quaedam laudatoria verba de me Magistro Marquardo scripsisse : et fuerunt haec verba scripta die 25. Septembris, quae fuit dies feriata.

Although I would have had to write many things against the little tractates of Lord Marquard, nevertheless I only wrote a few, which I did not want to communicate to him and his followers, not from fear of being defeated, as they suppose, but [because] I did not wish to provide the occasion for the multiplication of erroneous booklets etc. [...] The Lord Prior of Tegernsee fulfilled the words of the blessed John, saying: *We shall not love through the word nor through language but through work and truth*. He does not commend me with words but through work and truth: by lending [me] a book and by sending it to me across such a great distance of the earth, in which he showed to me such sympathy, which no forgetfulness will ever wipe from my heart etc. [...] I read that you have written certain laudatory words about me to Master Marquard: and these words were written on the 25th day of September, which was a holiday.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on ed. Pez [1729], p. 356.

<sup>2</sup> This, and the next, 'ad infra' are indications by the editor (Pez) that he is only supplying excerpts from this letter of Vincent.

APPENDIX SEVEN

LETTER OF THOMAS PAPLER (PRIOR OF AGGSBACH) TO JOHN  
SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM)<sup>1</sup>

Thomae, Prioris Cartusiae Axpacensis epistola ad eundem Iohannem de Weilheim. De Vincentio, quem pluribus quaestionibus nullum finem facere queritur, ac a scribendo vellet abstinere etc.

Dilecte Domine Iohannes. Frater Vincentius pluries mittit vobis quaestiones, super quibus petit responsum, et in quibus satis percipitis occupationem suam minus utilem. Et ego quaero a vobis, an caute permittam eum in talibus rebus occupari, ubi verisimiliter modicus vel nullus fructus sequitur. Admonuit me quidam nobilis et religiosus Praelatus in terra nostra dicens: *Pater, ego dico vobis, quod frater iste in periculo stat, quia in spiritu meridiano, id est, superbiae laborat, et vos tenemini sibi dicere tanquam pastor.* Ego vero considerans nunc senium personae et indurationem oculi eius, timeo saepius, si dure circa mihi displicibilia reprehenderem, deterius sequeretur: quia utique satis sibi scripsistis saepius: si voluisset perpendere, debuit se a certis compescere. Sed hucusque non video emendationem.

Secundo quaero, quare vitium proprietatis tam gravi censura punitur, gravior videatur. Super his dubijs peto

Letter of Thomas, Prior of the Carthusians of Aggsbach, to the same John of Weilheim. Regarding Vincent, whom he [i.e., Thomas] complains, will put no end to his many questions, and whom also he wishes to abstain from writing, etc.

Dear Master John. Brother Vincent has often sent you questions, regarding which he entreats a response, and in which you perceive well enough that his preoccupation is of little use. And I ask you whether it is prudent to permit him to occupy [himself] with such things, where little or no fruit follows. A certain noble and religious Prelate in our land admonished me, saying: "Father, I say to you that this brother is in peril, because he is *in spiritu meridiano*, that is, he is at risk of the sin of pride, and you are bound as pastor to say something to him." Now indeed, considering his age and poor eyesight, I often fear that if I were to reprehend [him], worse things would follow; because certainly you have written to him sufficiently many times: if he were willing to consider [the matter] carefully, he certainly would have checked it. But so far I do not see any improvement.

Secondly, I have a request regarding the means by which a sin of this seri

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on Ed. Pez, [1729], p. 357.

responsum tempore competenti, et  
cum reclusionione.

ousness ought to be punished, namely  
by the punishment of excommunica-  
tion, and not [by that of] intemperance  
or disobedience, since nevertheless  
disobedience would appear more seri-  
ous [i.e., is a more serious sin than  
that which Vincent has committed].  
Regarding these questions I request a  
prompt and full response.

## APPENDIX EIGHT

### TRANSLATION OF NOTES MADE BY JOHN SCHLITPACHER (OF WEILHEIM) AND LEOPOLD WYDEMANN SUMMARIZING THE STAGES OF DEBATE AND LISTING THE RESPECTIVE MAJOR TREATISES AND LETTERS INVOLVED<sup>1</sup>

Nota eiusdem Weilheimij in sequentes  
Vincentij epistolas.

Pro intellecta inferius dicendorum  
notandum, quod Religiosus Vir Frater  
Iohannes Slitpacher Monachos mon-  
asterij Mellicensis, et quidam alius  
Frater (Vincentius) alterius monasterij  
et ordinis (in Axpach Carthusiensis) a  
multis annis de consensu suorum Prae-  
latorum habuerunt et habent consue-  
tudinem sibi mutuo scedulas mittendi.  
Contigit autem ante aliquot annos,  
quod frater Iohannes communicavit  
alteri fratri *Laudatorium docte igno-  
rantiae*, qui perlegens illud, rescripsit  
sibi, quid de eo sentiret : non credens,  
nec suspicionem habens, quod Frater  
Iohannes esset illud scriptum in libro  
copiaturus; cuius tamen contrarium  
fecit sinceriter et absque dolo. Habet  
etiam ipse frater a fratre Iohanne mag-  
num cumulum scedularum, quarum  
nullam unquam in libro aliquot tran-  
scripsit, putavitque ita de suis scedu-  
lis agi debere. Si enim voluisset suum  
scriptum ad Zelatores doctae ignoran-  
tiae devenire, haud dubium, quin sua  
motiva clarius et extensius posuisset.  
Illud autem scriptum Impugnatorium,  
a quodam (Bernardo) in libro sibi a  
Fratre Iohanne communicato, casu

Notes of the same John of Weilheim  
[Schlitpacher] concerning the follow-  
ing letters of Vincent.

For the understanding of the things to  
be said below, it must be noted that the  
Religious Man, Brother Johannes Slit-  
pacher, Monk of the monastery of Melk,  
and a certain other brother (Vincent)  
of another monastery and order (of  
the Carthusians in Aggsbach), had and  
have had for many years, with the con-  
sent of their Prelates, the habit of send-  
ing documents to each other. However,  
it happened that a number of years ago,  
brother Johannes communicated to the  
other brother [i.e., Vincent] the *Lauda-  
torium docte ignorantie*, who, reading it,  
wrote back to him what he thought of it,  
not believing, nor having the suspicion  
that Brother Johannes would copy what  
is written in the book, [a copy] of which  
he nevertheless on the contrary made  
sincerely and without deceit. Likewise,  
that brother [i.e., Vincent] has from  
brother Johannes many accumulated  
documents, of which not a single one  
he transcribed in any other book, and  
[therefore] he supposed that his docu-  
ments would be treated in this way. For  
if he had wanted to deliver his text to  
the Enthusiasts of learned ignorance,  
there is no doubt that he would have

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on ed. Pez [1729], p. 342. These notes are undated. Leopold Wydemann was an 18th-century librarian at Melk.

inventum est, qui contra eiusdem scriptorem praemissum, *sexterniculum* (*Defensorium*) compilavit.

explained his intentions more clearly and extensively. However that text, the *Impugnatorium*, was by chance found by a certain man (Bernard) in a book sent to him by Brother Johannes, who [then] compiled a *sexterniculum* (the *Defensorium*) against the aforementioned writer

Nota, quod Dominus Cardinalis tituli S. Petri ad Vincula Episcopus Brixienensis, Nicolaus de Cusa vulgariter dictus, fecit libros de docta ignorantia ad minus tres. De quibus quidam Monachus ord. S. Benedicti de Monasterio (Tegernsee) dioecesis Frisingensis fecit breve Laudatorium, quod incipit : *ad sacre doctae ignorantiae notitiam*, quod visum quidam Cartusiensis (Vincentius) impugnavit scripto suo epistolari, alteri Monacho vicini (Mellicensis) monasterij misso. Casu autem illud (Vincentij) Impugnatorium, venit ad manus *Laudatoris* (Bernardi in Tegernsee) *doctae ignorantiae*. Qui (Bernardus) illo perlecto compilavit alium Tractatum prolixiorem, qui incipit : *Defensorium Laudatorij doctae ignorantiae contra impugnatorium eiusdem*. Adversus illud *Defensorium* Impugnator (Vincentius) *Laudatorij doctae ignorantiae*, sequentem edidit replicationem. Et ita patet origo horum scriptorium et causa.

Note that the Lord Cardinal, titular head of St. Peter in Chains, Bishop of Brixen, commonly called Nicolaus Cusanus, wrote at least three books on learned ignorance. Regarding these, a certain Monk of the order of St. Benedict of the Monastery (Tegernsee) of the diocese of Frising [i.e., Bernard], made a brief *Laudatorium*, which begins: *for the understanding of sacred learned ignorance*; this view a certain Carthusian (Vincent) attacked through his writing a letter, sent to another monk [Schlitzpacher] from a nearby monastery (Melk). However by chance that *Impugnatorium* (of Vincent), came into the hands of the *Praisor of learned ignorance* (Bernard of Tegernsee). Having read that, he (Bernard) compiled another, more extensive Tractate, which begins: *Defence of Praise of learned ignorance against the attack on the same*. Against this *Defence*, the Attacker (Vincent) of the *Praise of learned ignorance* issued a further *replicatio*. And thus is clear the (temporal) origin and the cause of these texts.

#### Annotatio Leopoldi Wydemanni

#### Annotation of Leopold Wydemann

Ex Lectis in codice mihi communicato colligo, in hac materia sequentia esse scripta, servato ordine.

I collect what I have read in a book sent to me; on this material the following [things] are written, according to their order.

- 1 Nicolai Cusani libros tres de docta ignorantia.

- 1 Nicolaus Cusanus' three books of *Learned Ignorance*.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anonymi cuiusdam tractatum de Ignorata literatura sive Doctrina.</li> <li>2. Cusani Apologiam contra ignorarum literaturam.</li> <li>3. Bernhardi Laudatorium doctae ignorantiae.</li> <li>4. Vincentij Impugnatorium doctae ignorantiae.</li> <li>5. Bernhardi Defensorium contra impugnatorium.</li> <li>6. Vincentij replicationem contra Defensorium.</li> <li>7. Bernhardi tractatum 42. foliorum, cuius titulum non invenio.</li> <li>8. Vincentij Epistolam invectivam contra praedictum Tractatum, quae incipit : <i>Viam veritatis cognoscere et amare</i>.</li> <li>9. Aliquot tam Bernhardi quam Vincentij Epistolas breviores in hac materia.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. An anonymous treatise on the <i>Unknown Learning</i> or <i>Doctrine</i>. [i.e., Wenck's <i>De ignota litteratura</i>]</li> <li>2. Cusanus' <i>Apology</i> against the <i>Unknown Learning</i>.</li> <li>3. Bernard's <i>Laudatorium</i> of <i>Learned Ignorance</i>.</li> <li>4. Vincent's <i>Impugnatorium</i> of <i>Learned Ignorance</i>.</li> <li>5. Bernard's <i>Defence</i> against the <i>Impugnatorium</i></li> <li>6. Vincent's <i>Replicatio</i> to the <i>Defence</i></li> <li>7. Bernard's tractate of 42 folios, whose title I did not find.</li> <li>8. Vincent's vituperative letter against the aforementioned tractate, which begins: <i>To know and to love the way of truth</i>.</li> <li>9. Some of both Bernard's and Vincent's briefer letters on these matters</li> </ol> |
|--|--|



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### MANUSCRIPTS

#### *Cusanus*

- Cod. Cus. 41 (Cusanus Bibliothek, Bernkastel-Kues)  
Cod. Cus. 179 (Cusanus Bibliothek, Bernkastel-Kues)  
Cod. Cus. 184 (Cusanus Bibliothek, Bernkastel-Kues)

#### *Other*

- John of Gelnhausen. Letter to Johannes Wenck, 1442. HS Cod. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 149v–150v.  
Johannes Keck. *Responsio fr. Johannis Keck doctoris in Theologia, professi huius monasterii Tegernsee s. Quirini martyris, super consultatione fratris Johannis, anachoretæ eremi valis Eni*. Tegernsee Clm. 18831, 244vb–245vb.  
Johannes Parreut. *Exercitata veteris artis*. Ingolstadt, 1492 (München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek).  
Johannes Wenck. Letter to John of Gelnhausen, 1442 (Wenck's summary of 17 'proposals' of Hans Franckfurter). Ms. Cod. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 151r–151v.  
— *De ignota litteratura*. Cod. Mog. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 134r–149r; Cod. 228/1467 8°, 307r–316v (Stadtbibliothek Trier).  
— Notes on the 1441 proceedings at Mainz. Cod. Vat. Pal. 600 (*Bibliotheca Vaticana*), 76v–77v.  
— *Das Büchlein von der Seele*. Heid. Hs. 959, 99r–113v (UB Heidelberg).  
— *Contra abstractam vitam Beghardorum*. Cf. Cod. Mc. 31, 35r (UB Tübingen).  
— Notes made on letter of unidentified authorship forwarded to Wenck by its recipient, and a copy of a 1438 letter by Felix Hemmerlin to the bishop of Constance. Cod. Vat. Pal. 600, 228r–233r, 226r–227r.  
Lecture by an unnamed Heidelberg doctor (in Johannes Wenck's possession), in which Beguines are depicted as legitimate representatives of church hierarchy and reform. Cod. Mog. 190 (Stadtbibliothek Mainz), 212r–213v.  
Vincent of Aggsbach. Letter to John Schlitpacher (of Weilheim), including the « Impugnatorium Laudatorii », Dec. 19, 1454. Cod. Mellic. 59, 113–116v.

### EDITIONS

#### *Cusanus*

- Klibansky, R. et al. eds. *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*. Iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem ed. Hamburg: Meiner, 1932–.  
Meuthen, E., ed. *Acta Cusana*. Hamburg: Meiner, 1976–.  
Lefèvre d'Étaples, Jacques, ed. Paris, 1514.  
Petri, Heinrich, ed. Basel, 1565.



## Other

- Bauer, G., ed. *Johannes Geiler von Kayserberg. Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. 1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989.
- Boyle, L., ed. *Lambert de Monte (von Heerenberg). Quaestio magistralis ostendens quid dici possit de salvatione Aristotelis*. Ed. Köln, 1498.
- Cathala, M. and Spiazzi, R., eds. *Thomas. In quattuordecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*. Turin, 1964.
- Guiljelmi Alverni Opera Omnia, Vol. I. Paris, 1674. Repr. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1963.
- Hamesse, J., ed. *Les auctoritates Aristotelis : un florilège médiéval, étude historique et édition critique*. Louvain: Publ. Univers., 1974.
- Mountain, W., ed. *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Trinitate libri 15 (Corpus Christianorum : Series Latina, 50a)*. Turnholt: Brepols, 1968.
- Pez, B. and Hueber, P., eds. *Codex Diplomatico-Historico-Epistolaris : Quo Diplomata, Chartæ, Epistolæ, Fragmenta Opusculorum, Epitaphia, et alia id genus vetera monumenta... continentur, totiusque pene Europæ historia illustratur*. Augustae Vind. et Graecii: Veith, 1729.
- Quint, J., ed. *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen Werke I, Predigten: 1*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958.
- *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen Werke V, Traktate*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963.
- Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita : cura et studio fratrum praedicatorum*. Tomus 22, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate ; Vol. 3, Romae : Typographia Polyglotta, 1977. 592–931.
- Steer, G., ed. *Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg. Das Büchlein von der Seele*. München: Fink Verlag, 1967.
- Stegmüller, F. ed. *Raimundi Lulli Opera Latina*. Palma of Majorca, 1961.
- Vansteenbergh, E., ed. *Le 'de ignota litteratura' de Jean Wenck de Herrenberg contre Nicolas de Cuse (BGPM 8, 6)*. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1910.
- *Autour de la Docte Ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XV<sup>e</sup> Siècle (BGPM XIV)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1915.
- Vuillemin-Diem, G., ed. *Aristoteles Latinus XXV 3.2. Metaphysica*. Recensio et translatio Guillelmi de Moerbeka. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- Vuillemin-Diem, G., ed. *Aristoteles Latinus XXV 2. Metaphysica*. Translatio anonyma sive 'Media'. Leiden: Brill, 1976.

## TRANSLATIONS

## Cusanus

- Bond, L., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- Dolan, J., trans. *Unity and Reform: Selected Writings of Nicholas de Cusa*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962.
- Euler, W., Reinhardt, K., and Schwaetzer, H., ed. and trans. *Nikolaus von Kues. Predigten in deutscher Übersetzung. Band 3. Sermones CXXII–CCIII*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2007.
- Hopkins, J., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430–1441*. Loveland, Colorado: Banning Press, 2003.
- *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1988.
- Izbicki, T., ed. and trans. *Nicholas of Cusa. Writings on Church and Reform (I Tatti Renaissance Library 33)*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Sikora, J. and Bohnenstädt, E., trans. *Predigten. 1430–1441*. Heidelberg: F.H. Kerle Verlag, 1952, 7–60.
- Wertz, W., trans. *Toward a New Council of Florence. 'On the Peace of Faith' and Other Works by Nicholas of Cusa*. Washington: Schiller Institute, Inc., 1995.

## Other

- Allgaier, K., ed. and trans. *Thomas Aquinas. Summa contra gentiles. Dritter Band, Teil 1.* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005.
- Brand, D., trans. *Proclus. The Book of Causes [Liber de Causis]*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984.
- Cornford, F., trans. *Aristotle. The Physics, Books I–IV* (Loeb Classical Library, No. 228). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Flasch, K., trans. *Meister Eckhart. Das Buch der göttlichen Tröstung.* München: Beck, 2007.
- Fowler, H., trans. *Plato. Parmenides.* London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1970.
- Grube, G., trans. *Plato. Apology*, in *Plato—Complete Works*. Cooper, J., ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997, 17–36.
- Hett, W., trans. *Aristotle. De anima* (Loeb Classical Library). London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1964.
- Martin, D., trans. and ed. *Carthusian Spirituality. The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte.* New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- McGuire, B., ed. and trans. *Jean Gerson. Early Works.* New York: Paulist Press, 1998.
- Maurer, A., trans. *Meister Eckhart. Parisian Questions and Prologues.* Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974.
- Morrow, G. and Dillon, J., trans. *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Parmenides.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Ozment, S. ed. and trans. *Jean Gerson. Selections from A Deo exivit, Contra curiositatem studentium and De mystica theologia speculativa.* Leiden: Brill, 1969.
- Pegis, A., trans. *Thomas Aquinas. Summa Contra Gentiles.* London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.
- Rettig, J., trans. *Augustine. Tractates on the Gospel of John 28–54.* Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993.
- Robertson, D., trans. *Augustine. On Christian Doctrine.* Prentice Hall, 1958.
- Tredennick, H., trans. *Aristotle. Metaphysics I–IX & X–XIV.* (Vols. XVII and XVIII, Loeb Classical Library) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961–2.

## LEXICA

- Edwards, P., ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967.
- Herberman, C. et al. eds. *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909.
- Mittelstraß, J., ed. *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie, Band 2.* Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1984.
- Ruh, K., ed. *Die deutsche Litteratur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon. Bd. 4.* Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983.
- *Die deutsche Litteratur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon. Bd. 9.* Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995.
- Vacant A. and Mangenot, E., eds. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique. Vol. II.* Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1910.
- Volpi, F., ed. *Großes Werklexikon der Philosophie. Band 2.* Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2004.

## BIBLICAL SOURCES

- The New English Bible. New Testament, 2nd Ed.* Cambridge: Oxford University Press & Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- La Sainte Bible Polyglotte. Nouveau Testament, Tome VII.* Paris: R. Roger et F. Chernoviz, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1908.
- Nova Vulgata. Bibliorum Sacrorum Edition.* Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

- Aertsen, J. "Der Satz vom Widerspruch in der mittelalterlichen Philosophie. Baron von Münchhausen, Thomas von Aquin und Nikolaus von Kues" in Jacobi, K., ed. *Argumentationstheorie. Scholastische Forschungen zu den logischen und semantischen Regeln korrekten Folgerns*. Leiden: Brill, 1993, 707–727.
- Álvarez-Gómez, M. "Die Lehre vom menschlichen Geist (Intellectus/Vernunft) in den Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues" in *MFCG* 31. Trier: Paulinus, 2006, 211–243.
- Aris, M. "Zur Soziologie der Sermones-rezipienten" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 93–115.
- "Vos Moguntini. Nikolaus von Kues (1401–1464) predigt den Mainzern" in *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* (1998), 191–217.
- Bellitto, C. et al. eds. *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Baum, W. *Nicolaus Cusanus in Tirol. Das Wirken des Philosophen und Reformators als Fürstbischof von Brixen*. Bozen: Athesia, 1983.
- Bianco, F. *Die Alte Universität Köln. Band 2*. Köln: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1974 [reprint of the 1855 Köln edition].
- Beierwaltes, W. "Cusanus und Proklos zum Neuplatonischen Ursprung des non Aliud" in *Nicolo' Cusano: Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno*. Firenze: G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1970, 137–140.
- Biechler, J. *The Religious Language of Nicholas of Cusa*. Missoula, Montana: Scholar's Press, 1975.
- Bond, L. "The Changing Face of Posse: Another Look at Nicholas Cusanus' *De Apice Theoriae* (1464)" in *Nicholas of Cusa: A Medieval Thinker for the Modern Age*. Kazuhiko Yamaki, ed. Waseda: Curzon International Press, 2002.
- Brient, E. "Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa on the 'Where' of God" in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 128–150.
- Brown, C. *Pastor and Laity in the Theology of Jean Gerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Burger, C. "Theologie und Laienfrömmigkeit. Transformationsversuche im Spätmittelalter" in *Lebenslehren und Weltentwürfe im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*. Boockman, H., ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989, 400–419.
- Casarella, P. "His Name is Jesus: Negative Theology in Two Writings of Nicholas of Cusa from 1440" in Christianson, G. and Izbicki, T., eds. *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCusky Brooks for the American Cusanus Society*. Leiden: Brill, 1996, 281–307.
- "Neues zu den Quellen der cusanischen Mauer-Symbolik" in *MFCG* 19. Trier: Paulinus, 1991, 273–286.
- Cranz, E. "Development in Cusanus?" in Izbicki, T., ed. *Nicholas of Cusanus and the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate-Variation, 2000, 1–18.
- "Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Christian Thought" in Izbicki, T., ed. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 73–94.
- "Nicolaus Cusanus and Dionysius Areopagita" in Izbicki, T., ed. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 109–136.
- "Cusanus' Use of Pseudo-Dionysius" in Izbicki, T., ed. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 137–150.
- Dahm, A., "Vernunft und Glaube in den Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues" in *MFCG* 31. Trier: Paulinus, 2006, 245–273.
- *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues: Ihre Entwicklung von seinen frühen Predigten bis zum Jahr 1445*. Munster: Aschendorff, 1997.

- D'Amico, C. "Nikolaus von Kues als Leser von Proklos" in Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. Regensburg: Roderer Verlag, 2007, 33–64.
- Davies, B. and Leftow, B. *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Denzinger, H. *Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*. Freiburg: Herder, 2007, 388–389.
- De Libera, A. *La querelle des universaux : de Platon à la fin du Moyen Age*. Paris: Seuil, 1996.
- Döllinger, I. *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters. Teil II. Dokumente vornehmlich zur Geschichte der Valdesier und Katharer*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1890.
- Ehrle, F. *Der Sentenzenkommentar Peters von Candia des Pisaner Papstes Alexanders V.* Münster: Aschendorff, 1925.
- Emery, K. "Denys the Carthusian and Traditions of Meditation: *Contra detestabilem cordis inordinationem*" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 1–26.
- "Twofold wisdom and contemplation in Denys of Ryckel (Dionysius Cartusienensis, 1402–1471)" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 99–134.
- "Denys the Carthusian and the Doxography of Scholastic Theology" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 327–359.
- "Theology as a Science: The Teaching of Denys of Ryckel (Dionysius Cartusienensis, 1402–1471)" in Emery, K. *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Later Middle Ages*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 376–388.
- Enders, M. *Gelassenheit und Abgeschiedenheit—Studien zur deutschen Mystik*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2008.
- Estrada, P. "Dreieinige Vollkommenheit der Liebe und der menschlichen Freiheit in *De visione Dei* von Nicolaus Cusanus" in Schwaetzer, H. and Stahl, H., eds. *Universalität der Vernunft und Pluralität der Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus (Philosophie Interdisziplinär 27)*. Regensburg: Roderer Verlag, 2008, 169–182.
- Euler, W. "Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Etappen und Schwerpunkt-mässige Themenverschiebungen in den Sermones?" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 71–91.
- "Proclamation of Christ in Selected Sermons from Cusanus' Brixen Period" in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Izbicki, T. and Bellitto, C., eds. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 89–103.
- "Does Nicholas of Cusa have a Theology of the Cross?" in *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), 405–420.
- *Unitas und Pax. Religionsvergleich bei Raimundus Lullus und Nikolaus von Kues*. Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1990.
- Flasch, K. *Nikolaus von Kues, Geschichte einer Entwicklung*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998.
- *Nicolaus Cusanus*. München: Beck, 2001.
- "Procedere ut imago. Das Hervorgehen des Intellekts aus seinem göttlichen Grund bei Meister Dietrich, Meister Eckhart und Berthold von Moosburg" in Ruh, K., ed. *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter (Symposion Kloster Engelberg 1984)*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986, 125–134.
- Frost, S. *Nikolaus von Kues und Meister Eckhart. Rezeption im Spiegel der Marginalien zum Opus Tripartitum Meister Eckharts*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006.
- "Die Meister Eckhart Rezeption des Nikolaus von Kues" in Schwaetzer, H., ed. *Nicolaus Cusanus. Perspektiven seiner Geistphilosophie*. Regensburg: Roderer, 2003.

- Führer, M. "Cusanus Platonicus: References to the Term 'Platonici' in Nicholas of Cusa" in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*. Gersh, S. and Hoenen, M., eds. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002, 345–357.
- Gabriel, A. "'Via antiqua' and 'Via moderna' and the Migration of Paris Students and Masters to the German Universities in the fifteenth Century" in *MM* 9 (1974), 439–483.
- Gandillac, M. "Die aristotelische erste Philosophie nach 'De venatione sapientiae'" in *MFCG* 6. Trier: Paulinus, 1967, 30–34.
- Gawlich, G. "Zur Nachwirkung Cusanischen Ideen im Siebzehnten und Achtzehnten Jahrhundert" in *Nicolo' Cusano: Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno*. Firenze: G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1970, 225–239.
- Haas, A. *Deum mystice videre... in caligine coincidentiae: Zum Verhältnis Nikolaus von Kues zur Mystik* (24. Vorlesung der Aeneas-Silvius-Stiftung, gehalten in der Universität Basel). Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1989.
- Hallauer, H. "Nikolaus von Kues als Rechtshistoriker. Sein Kampf um die Bewahrung der Brixener Kirche" in *MFCG* 24. Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1998, 103–170.
- "Das Glaubensgespräch mit den Hussiten" in *MFCG* 9. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1971, 53–75.
- Haubst, R. *Streifzüge in die cusanische Theologie*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1991.
- "Die erkenntnistheoretische und mystische Bedeutung der Mauer der Koinzidenz" in *MFCG* 18. Trier: Paulinus, 1989, 167–195.
- "Albert, wie Cusanus ihn sah" in *Albertus Magnus. Doctor Universalis 1280/1980*. Meyer, G. and Zimmerman, A., eds. Mainz, 1980.
- Johannes von Franckfurt als der mutmaßliche Verfasser von "Eyn deutsch Theologia" in *Scholastik* 33 (1958), 375–398.
- *Der Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1956.
- *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck (BGPTM 38, Heft 1)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1955.
- *Das Bild des Einen und Dreieinen Gottes in der Welt nach Nikolaus von Kues* (Trierer Theologische Studien 4). Trier, 1952.
- "Zum Fortleben Alberts des Grossen bei Heymerich von Kamp und Nikolaus von Kues" in *Studia Albertina (BGPTMA Supplementband 4)*. Ostlender, H., ed. Münster: Aschendorff, 1952, 420–47.
- Heiß, R. "Der Aristotelismus in der Artistenfakultät der alten Universität Köln" in *Festschrift zur Erinnerung an die Gründung der alten Universität Köln im Jahre 1388*. Köln: Kurt Schroeder Verlag, 1938, pp. 288–315.
- Hirschberger, J. "Das Platon-Bild bei Nikolaus von Kues" in *Nicolo' Cusano: Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno*. Firenze: G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1970, 113–135.
- Hoenen, M. "Universities and Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Lagerlund, H., ed. Heidelberg: Springer, forthcoming.
- "Albertism" in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Lagerlund, H., ed. Heidelberg: Springer, forthcoming.
- "Translating Mystical Texts from the Vernacular into Latin. The Intentions and Strategies behind Laurentius Surius' Edition of John of Ruusbroec's Complete Works (Cologne 1552)" in Beccarisi, A., et al., eds., *Per Perscrutationem philosophicam. Neue Perspektiven der mittelalterlichen Forschung*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008, 348–374.
- "Secundum vocem concordare, sensu tamen discrepare". Der Streit um die Deutung des Aristoteles an der Universität Ingolstadt im späten 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhundert" in *Politischer Aristotelismus und Religion in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Fidora, A., Fried, J., Lutz-Bachmann, M., Schorn-Schütte, L., eds. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007, 67–88.
- "'Caput scholae rationis est Christus'. Verschränkung von Exegese und Philosophie in den Predigten des Cusanus" in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 43–69.
- "Zurück zu Autorität und Tradition. Geistesgeschichtliche Hintergründe des Traditionalismus an den spätmittelalterlichen Universitäten" in *Herbst des Mittelalters? Fragen Zur Bewertung Des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*. M. Pickave and J. Aertsen, eds. (*Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 31) Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 133–146.

- “*Via Antiqua and Via Moderna* in the fifteenth Century: Doctrinal, Institutional, and Church Political Factors in the Wegestreit” in Friedman, R. and Nielsen, L., eds., *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003, 9–36.
- “Theology and Metaphysics: The Debate between John Wyclif and John Kenningham on the Principles of Reading the Scriptures” in Brocchieri, M., ed. *John Wyclif: logica, politica, teologica*. Sismel: Edizione del Galluzzo, 2003, 23–55.
- “‘Modus loquendi platonicorum’. Johannes Gerson und seine Kritik an Platon und den Platonisten” in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages. A Doxographic Approach*. Gersh, S. and Hoenen, M., eds. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002, 325–344.
- “*Virtus Sermonis* and the Trinity. Marsilius of Inghen and the Semantics of Late-Fourteenth Century Theology” in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology 10* (Cambridge, 2001), 157–171.
- “Tradition and Renewal: The Philosophical Setting of fifteenth-Century Christology, Heymericus de Campo, Nicolaus Cusanus and the Cologne *Quaestiones vacantiales* [1465]” in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*. Emery, K. and Wawrykow, J., eds. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, 517–543.
- “*Ista prius inaudita*. Eine neuentdeckte Vorlage der *Docta ignorantia* und ihre Bedeutung für die frühe Philosophie des Nikolaus von Kues” in *Medioevo. Rivista di storia della filosofia medievale*, 21 (1995), 375–476.
- “Metaphysik und Intellektlehre: die aristotelische Lehre des ‘intellectus agens’ im Schnittpunkt der mittelalterlichen Diskussion um die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis” in *Theologie und Philosophie* 70 (1995), 405–413.
- , ed. *Albertus Magnus und der Albertismus*. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- Hoffmann, F. “Nominalistische Vorläufer für die Erkenntnisproblematik bei Nikolaus von Kues” in *MFCG 11*. Trier: Paulinus, 1975, 125–167.
- Hopkins, J. *Nicholas of Cusa’s Metaphysical Speculations. Vol II*. Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2000.
- *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1988.
- Horn C. “Cusanus über Platon und dessen Pythagoreismus” in *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag, 2007, 9–32.
- Hoye, W. “Die Grenze des Wissens. Nikolaus von Kues in Auseinandersetzung mit der mystischen Theologie des Dionysius Areopagita” in Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. Regensburg: Roderer, 2007, 87–102.
- “The Meaning of Neoplatonism in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa” in *The Downside Review* 104 (1986), 10–18.
- Hundersmarck, L. and Izbicki, T. “Nicholas of Cusa’s Early Sermons on the Incarnation: An Early Renaissance Philosopher-Theologian as Preacher” in Izbicki, T. and Bellitto, C., eds. *Nicholas Of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 80–88.
- Imbach, R. “*Primum Principium*. Anmerkungen zum Wandel in der Auslegung der Bedeutung und Funktion des Satzes vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch bei Thomas von Aquin, Nikolaus von Autrecourt, Heymericus de Campo und Nikolaus von Kues” in Pickavé, M., ed. *Die Logik des Transzendentalen (MM 30)*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003, 600–616.
- *Laien in der Philosophie des Mittelalters: Hinweise und Anregungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema*. Amsterdam: Grüner, 1989.
- Izbicki, T. “An Ambivalent Papalism: Peter in the Sermons of Nicholas of Cusa” in *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History: Essays in Honour of Nancy S. Streuver*. Marino, J. and Schlitt, M., eds. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001, 49–65.



- Jost, W., and Olmsted, W., eds. *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Klibansky, R. *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition During the Middle Ages & Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. London: Kraus International Publications, 1982.
- . *Ein Proklos-Fund und seine Bedeutung*. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929.
- Koch, J. "Zur Analogielehre Meister Eckharts" in *Kleine Schriften. Erster Band*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1973, 367–397.
- . *Vier Predigten im Geiste Eckharts. Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1936/37, 2. Abhandlung. (Cusanus-Texte 1, 2./5)*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1937.
- Kremer, K. "Wege und Art der Gotteserkenntnis in den Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues" in *MFCG 31*. Trier: Paulinus, 2006, 53–102.
- . "Weisheit als Voraussetzung und Erfüllung der Sehnsucht des menschlichen Geistes" in *MFCG 20*. Trier: Paulinus, 1992, 137–139.
- Kretzmann, N. et al., eds. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Kreuzer, J. "Der Geist als imago Dei—Augustinus und Cusanus" in Reinhardt, K. and Schwaetzer, H., eds. *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*. Regensburg: Roderer, 2007, 65–86.
- Kuhnekath, K. *Die Philosophie des Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg im Vergleich zu den Lehren des Nikolaus von Kues*. Köln: University of Köln Press, 1975.
- Laurent, M. *Bybliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae: Codices Manu Scripti Recensiti. Codices 1135–1266*. Bybliotheca Vaticana, 1958.
- Leff, G. *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. An Institutional and Intellectual History*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968.
- Leinkauf, T. *Nicolaus Cusanus. Eine Einführung*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006.
- Lentzen-Deis, W. *Den Glauben Christi Teilen. Theologie und Verkündigung bei Nikolaus von Kues*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1991.
- McGinn, B. "Seeing and Not Seeing. Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism" in Casarella, P., ed. *Cusanus. The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006, 26–53.
- . *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)*. New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2005.
- . *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2004.
- . *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*. New York, NY: Crossroad Pub., 2001.
- . *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200–1350*. New York, NY: Crossroad Pub., 1998.
- . *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century*. New York, NY: Crossroad Pub., 1996.
- . *The Presence of God: a History of Western Christian Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad Pub., 1991.
- Martin, D. *Carthusian Spirituality. The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- . *Fifteenth Century Carthusian Reform. The World of Nicholas Kempf*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.
- Marx, J. *Verzeichnis der Handschriften-Sammlung des Hospitals zu Cues bei Bernkastel a./Mosel*. Trier: Selbstverlag des Hospitals, 1905.
- Meerssemann, G. *Geschichte des Albertismus, Heft 2: Die ersten Kölner Kontroversen (Dissertationes historicae 5)*. Rome, 1935.

- Meier-Oeser, S. *Die Präsenz des Vergessenen. Zur Rezeption der Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus vom 15. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1989.
- Meuthen, E. *Cusanus und die Orden: aus der geistlichen Welt des späten Mittelalters*. Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1996.
- “Die deutsche Legationsreise von Nikolaus von Kues” in *Lebenslehren und Weltentwürfe*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989, 421–499.
- *Nikolaus von Kues 1401–1464. Skizze einer Biographie*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1979.
- (English translation) Crowner, D. and Christianson, G., trans. *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010.
- “Nikolaus von Kues in der Entscheidung zwischen Konzil und Papst” in *MFCG* 9. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1971, 19–33.
- Miller, C. “Aristotle in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De beryllo*”. (Forthcoming: paper presented March 20, 2009 at the sessions of the Cusanus Society of America at the annual RSA conference in Los Angeles, California).
- “Meister Eckhart in Nicholas of Cusa’s 1456 Sermon: *Ubi est qui natus est rex iudeorum?*” in *Nicholas Of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe and Charles Trinkaus*. Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2002, 105–114.
- “Nicholas of Cusa’s *The Vision of God*” in Szarmach, P., ed. *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1984, 293–312.
- Mojsisch, B. *Meister Eckhart. Analogie, Univoxität und Einheit*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983.
- Monaco, D. “La visione di Dio e la pace nella fede” in Schwaetzer, H. and Stahl, H., eds. *Universalität der Vernunft und Pluralität der Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus (Philosophie Interdisziplinär 27)*. Regensburg: Roderer Verlag, 2008, 21–30.
- Moritz, A. *Explizite Komplikationen. Der radikale Holismus des Nikolaus von Kues*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2006.
- “Aristotelische Physik und Cusanische Koinzidenz. Mittelalterliche Rezeptionen der aristotelischen Unendlichkeitsdiskussion als Vorgeschichte der cusanischen Koinzidenzlehre” in *MFCG* 29. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 161–182.
- Obermann, H. *Contra vanam curiositatem. Ein Kapitel der Theologie zwischen Seelenwinkel und Weltall*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974.
- Offermann, U. *Christus—Wahrheit des Denkens. Eine Untersuchung zur Schrift «De docta ignorantia» des Nikolaus von Kues (BGPTM 33)*. München: Aschendorff, 1991.
- O’Malley, J. *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1979.
- Pauli, H. “Die geistige Welt der Brixener Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues” in *MFCG* 22. Trier: Paulinus, 1995, 163–186.
- Perczel, I., ed. *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy: Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*. Leuven: Leuven Univ. Pr., 2005.
- Petry, R. “Emphasis on the Gospel and Christian Reform in Late Medieval Preaching” in *Church History* 16 (1947), 75–91.
- Rapp, C. “Aristoteles über die Rechtfertigung des Satzes vom Widerspruch” in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 47 (1993), 521–541.
- Redlich, V. *Tegernsee und die deutsche Geistesgeschichte im 15. Jahrhundert*. München: Kommission für Bayerische Landesgeschichte, 1931.
- Reinhardt, K. “Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Bibelexegese” in *MFCG* 27. Trier: Paulinus, 2001, 31–63.
- Ritter, G. *Via antiqua und via moderna auf den deutschen Universitäten des XV. Jahrhunderts*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1922.
- Roßmann, H. “Die Geschichte der Kartause Aggsbach” in Hogg, J., et al., eds. *Die Kartause Aggsbach (Analecta Cartusiana 169)*. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 2000, 57–285.
- “Der Tegernseer Benediktiner Johannes Keck über die mystische Theologie” in *MFCG* 13. Mainz: Matthias Grünwald Verlag, 1978, 330–352.



- “Der Magister Marquard Sprenger in München und seine Kontroversschriften zum Konzil von Basel und zur mystischen Theologie” in Roßmann, H. and Ratzinger, J., eds. *Mysterium der Gnade. Festschrift für Johann Auer*. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1975, 353–411.
- Roth, U. *Suchende Vernunft. Der Glaubensbegriff des Nicolaus Cusanus (BGPTM 55)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 2000.
- Schiewer, H.-J. “German Sermons in the Middle Ages” in Kienzle, B., ed. *The Sermon*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, 861–956.
- Schmitt, A. “Synästhesie im Urteil aristotelischer Philosophie” in Adler, H. and Zeuch, U., eds. *Synästhesie. Interferenz—Transfer—Synthese der Sinne*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002, 108–147.
- Schönborn, C. “De docta ignorantia als christozentrischer Entwurf” in Jacobi, K., ed. *Nikolaus von Kues. Einführung in sein philosophisches Denken*. Freiburg, 1979, 138–156.
- Senger, H. *Ludus sapientiae. Studien zum Werk und zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.
- “Was geht Lambert von Heerenberg die Seeligkeit des Aristoteles an?” in *MM* 15. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982, 293–311.
- Stammkötter, F. “‘*Hic homo parum curat de dictis Aristotelis*’. Der Streit zwischen Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg und Nikolaus von Kues um die Gültigkeit des Satzes vom zu vermeidenden Widerspruch” in *MM* 31 (2004), 433–444.
- Steer, G. “Die Predigten des Cusanus im Vergleich mit dem Predigtwerk von Meister Eckhart” in *MFCG* 30. Trier: Paulinus, 2005, 145–169.
- Stieber, J. *Pope Eugenius IV, the Council of Basel, and the Secular and Ecclesiastical Authorities in the Empire*. Leiden: Brill, 1978.
- Stock, A. “Die Rolle der ‘Icona Dei’ in der Spekulation ‘De visione Dei’” in *MFCG* 18. Trier: Paulinus, 1989, 50–68.
- Stump, E. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Sullivan, D. “The Reform of Popular Religion in the Germanies” in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*. Christianson, G. and Izbicki, T. eds. Leiden: Brill, 1996, 165–173.
- Thir, K. “Der heilige Bruno und die Kartäuser” in Hogg, J., et al., eds. *Die Kartause Aggsbach (Analecta Cartusiana 169)*. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 2000, 3–8.
- Turner, D. “Dionysius and some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe” in Coakley, S. and Stang, C., eds. *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Thurner, M. *Gott als das offenbare Geheimnis nach Nikolaus von Kues*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001.
- Töpke, G. *Die Matrikel der Universität Heidelberg*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1884.
- Treusch, U. *Bernhard von Waging (+ 1472), ein Theologe der Melker Reformbewegung: Monastische Theologie im 15. Jahrhundert*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 2011.
- Trottmann, C. “*Sic in vi affectiva* : Note sur *De theologia mystica* III, 27, sa réception par Vincent d’Aggsbach, son dépassement par Gerson et quelques auteurs ultérieurs” in *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 45 (SIEPM). Turnhout: Brepols, 2003, 167–188.
- Vansteenberghe, E. *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues*. Paris: Minerva, 1920.
- Van Velthoven, T. *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität. Studien zur Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues*. Leiden: Brill, 1977, pp. 105–106.
- Wackerzapp, H. *Der Einfluss Meister Eckharts auf die ersten philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues (1440–1450) (BGPTM 39,3)*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1962.
- Watanabe, M. “Nicholas of Cusa and the Reform of the Roman Curia” in *Concord and Reform: Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the fifteenth Century*. Izbicki, T. and Christianson, G., eds. Aldershot: Ashgate variorum, 2001, 169–185.

- “The Episcopal Election of 1430 in Trier and Nicholas of Cusa” in *Concord and Reform. Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 117–131.
- “The Council of Florence and the Acceptatio of Mainz” in *Concord and Reform. Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 103–115.
- “The German Church shortly before the Reformation: Nicholas Cusanus and the Veneration of the Bleeding Hosts at Wilsnack” in *Concord and Reform. Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 117–131.
- Weier, R. “Christliche Existenz und Kirchlichkeit als Kernproblem in den Briefen des Cusanus an die Hussiten” in *MFCG 13*. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1978, 264–278.
- Wilpert, P. “Bernhard von Waging, Reformers vor der Reformation” in Goetz, W., ed. *Festgabe für Seine Königliche Hoheit Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern* München-Pasing: Verl. Bayer. Heimatforschung, 1953, 274–276.
- Zibermayr, I. *Die Legation des Kardinals Nikolaus Cusanus und die Ordensreform in der Kirchenprovinz Salzburg*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1914.
- Ziebart, K.M. “Heymeric of Camp” in Lagerlund, H. ed. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011, 473–476.
- “Some Reflections on Aristotle in the Works of Cusanus” in Schwaetzer, H. and Stahl, H., eds. *Universalität der Vernunft und Pluralität der Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus (Philosophie Interdisziplinär 27)*. Regensburg: Roderer Verlag, 2008, 135–168.



## INDEX

- abgeschieden Leben*, 57, 76, 85, 88, 94, 110, 176
- Absolute and contracted maximum, 15–19
- Absolute maximum, 15–16, 45
- affective theology, 44, 163, 179, 195, 249, 268, 277
- Aggsbach, Vincent of, 1, 51–52, 136–139, 141–142, 145–147, 149–153, 158–160, 162–165, 169, 170 n. 124, 171–188, 191, 193–198, 256, 261, 279, 280, 287–290, 294–295, 302, 306–307, 309
- Impugnatorium doctae ignorantiae*, 1, 137, 169, 311
- Tractatus cuiusdam Cartusienensis de Mystica Theologia* (Treatise contra Gerson), 158
- Aindorffer, Abbot Caspar, 144–145, 153–155, 156 n. 79, 156 n. 81, 157 n. 82, 158, 160, 161 nn. 92–93, 162 n. 94, 163, 165, 167–168, 195 n. 205, 196 n. 206, 197 n. 207, 238 n. 5, 249, 256 n. 57, 257 n. 58, 261 n. 68, 275, 287–289
- Albert the Great, 230, 231 n. 104
- Albertist, Albertism, 3 n. 2, 6, 52, 197, 224 n. 83
- Ambrose, St., 11
- Anaxagoras, 227
- Anselm, of Canterbury, 25 n. 67
- anterioriter* reasoning, 188, 221 n. 76, 222, 228, 229 n. 101, 283
- antiqui*, 4, 6, 69 n. 71, 70 n. 78, 85, 280
- Aquinas, Thomas, 6 n. 6, 7, 8 n. 15, 54 n. 5, 229, 276 n. 106
- Aristotelica secta*, 102, 119, 135, 213
- Aristotle
- De anima*, 53 n. 4, 54 n. 5, 58 n. 22, 68, 81, 170, 172 n. 132, 205 n. 15, 223
- first philosophy, 216
- Metaphysics*, 8, 71, 204–205, 210–212, 214, 228, 232
- Nicomachean Ethics*, 204–205, 208, 210, 228
- Physics*, 233
- privation, 210 n. 34, 217, 232–234
- Auctoritates Aristotelis*, 205 n. 15, 207
- Augustine, Saint, 9–10, 22 n. 62, 31, 32 n. 95, 62, 64 n. 59, 99, 114 n. 212, 131 n. 266, 168, 172, 201, 206, 226, 241 n. 10
- Balma, Hugh of, 25 n. 68, 147, 151 n. 65, 154, 158–159, 172–173, 176–177, 178 n. 158, 179, 187–188, 196, 279, 288, 295
- Viae Sion lugent*, 176 n. 158, 178 n. 160, 187
- Basel, Council of, 55–56, 59, 60 n. 34, 61, 92, 138 n. 4, 139–140, 145, 147, 149, 151–152, 154 n. 75, 182–183, 295, 302
- Baum, Wilhelm, 58 n. 26, 61 n. 37, 62 n. 49, 63 n. 50, 139 n. 7, 140 nn. 12, 16, 18, 141 nn. 20, 23–25, 152 n. 67, 165 nn. 101, 104, 173 n. 139, 174 n. 145, 175 n. 152, 145
- Beghards, Beghardism, 61 n. 43, 67 n. 67
- Beguines, 76
- Beierwaltes, Werner, 34
- Campo, Heymericus de, 6, 105 n. 186, 197, 216 n. 56, 224 nn. 83, 84
- Carthusian order, 139, 183, 196
- Cassirer, Ernst, 33–34 n. 100, 115
- coincidentia oppositorum*, doctrine of, 8, 27, 202, 215, 228, 232, 280
- comparativa inquisitio*, 39, 216
- complicatio/explicatio* (enfolding/unfolding), 12 n. 33, 16, 37–38, 45–46
- Conciliarism, 56, 61 nn. 38–39, 92, 139–140, 145–147, 149, 151–152, 153 n. 70, 182, 186, 197
- connata religio*, 121, 122 n. 233, 124–125, 132, 280
- Constantinople, Fall of, 150, 279, 289
- crucifixion, 20, 249, 264–265
- Cusanus, Nicolaus
- Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, 1–3, 54, 56, 61 n. 39, 63 n. 54, 88, 89 n. 130, 90 nn. 134, 136, 92 n. 139, 93 n. 142, 96 n. 155, 97 n. 158, 104 n. 178, 179 n. 164, 213
- Brixen bishopric, 58 n. 26, 143–144, 169, 204 n. 13, 207, 271, 288, 302
- De aequalitate*, 6 n. 6
- De apice theoriae*, 13, 89 n. 132
- De beryllo*, 204, 214, 216–218, 227–228, 232–235, 287
- De concordantia catholica*, 237 n. 2
- De coniecturis*, 3
- De docta ignorantia*, 1, 2, 4, 9 n. 20, 10, 12, 14–15, 16 n. 45, 19 nn. 50–51, 20 n. 57, 22 n. 63, 23–28, 30–33, 35, 36

- n. 111, 37–38, 44–45, 51–52, 54, 57–59, 63–64, 72–73, 75–76, 77 n. 100, 78–79, 82, 86 n. 125, 87–88, 91 n. 138, 96 n. 154, 97 n. 158, 98, 101, 104, 106, 122 n. 233, 127 n. 249, 138, 140, 144, 147, 154–155, 176, 178–179, 196, 204, 206, 209, 214 n. 51, 215, 222, 223 nn. 79, 82, 224, 225 nn. 88–89, 226, 228, 245, 258 n. 62, 276, 277 n. 107, 281, 290, 302
- De genesi*, 89 n. 132, 204 n. 10
- De ludo globi*, 89 n. 132, 204 n. 10
- De mathematicis complementis*, 164, 287–288
- De non aliud, 89 n. 132, 204–205, 213–214, 217, 219, 221 nn. 75, 77, 228–229, 232, 235
- De pace fidei*, 3, 32 n. 98, 39, 70 n. 75, 287
- De possest, 89 n. 132
- De principio*, 6 n. 6, 204 n. 10
- De theologicis complementis*, 164
- De venatione sapientiae*, 202 n. 3, 204, 205, 213, 227
- De visione Dei*, 1, 38 n. 122, 52, 147, 155, 163, 165–167, 169, 176, 178, 188–189, 191 nn. 193–194, 192–195, 248, 252–253, 269, 287–288, 295, 299 n. 2
- German legation (1451–52), 59–60, 105, 141, 150, 287, 302
- Idiota de mente*, 1, 3, 10 n. 22, 86, 105, 107, 118, 119 n. 228, 121 n. 231, 122–123, 125 n. 238, 127 n. 250, 130 nn. 263–264, 131, 157, 189 n. 193, 204 n. 10, 225 n. 88, 241, 251, 253, 262, 272, 280
- Idiota de sapientia*, 10 n. 22, 13 nn. 36–37, 29 n. 85, 45 n. 152, 90 n. 135, 103 n. 177, 106 nn. 181–182, 108, 109 nn. 194–195, 111 n. 201, 112 n. 206, 114 n. 213, 116 n. 219, 223 n. 82
- Idiota de staticis experimentis*, 105, 111 n. 199
- Dahm, Albert, 6, 7, 40–42, 45
- Dangelmayr, Siegfried, 25 n. 66
- De beryllo*, 168 n. 115, 204 nn. 10, 12, 214 nn. 50–51, 215 n. 52, 216 n. 57, 218 nn. 64, 67, 222 n. 77, 225 n. 88, 227 n. 98, 232 n. 106, 233 n. 112, 234 n. 114
- deification, process of, 36, 208, 264
- Denys the Carthusian, 158 n. 83, 182 n. 174, 197
- detached life. *See Abgeschieden Leben*
- Devotio moderna*, 5
- Dinkelsbühl, Nikolaus, 139–141
- Eckhart, Meister, 54, 59, 72–77, 79–81, 85–88, 96–97, 132, 246 n. 23
- Emery, Kent, 158 n. 83, 183 n. 174, 197 n. 207
- equality, 18, 29, 129, 216
- Eriugena
- Periphyseon*, 97 n. 158
- Eugene IV, Pope, 55, 59, 61, 140, 149–150, 173 n. 144, 182, 302
- Euler, Walter, 24 n. 65, 32 n. 98, 40, 237 nn. 1–2, 238 n. 3, 254 n. 49
- felicitas iucundissima*, 208–209
- Flasch, Kurt, 6–7, 34, 42, 43 n. 143, 79 n. 107, 106 n. 181, 109 n. 194, 110 n. 198, 111 n. 199, 119 n. 227, 121, 122 n. 233, 130 n. 263, 202
- Florence, Council of, 55 n. 10, 150
- formed faith, 275, 276 n. 106, 278
- Franckfurter, Hans, 60 n. 33, 61, 62–63, 67, 72, 291
- Frost, Stefanie, 96 nn. 153–154
- Geisenfeld, Conrad von, 140–141, 145, 151, 159, 165, 169, 172–173, 179 n. 163
- Gelnhausen, John of (Abbot of Maulbronn), 53, 54, 57 n. 19, 58 n. 24, 60–63, 67, 89, 92, 142, 155, 291
- “Gerchumar”, 137, 138 n. 6, 172, 176, 179, 183–184, 288, 295, 299
- Gerson, Jean, 51 n. 1, 64–65, 137, 139 n. 7, 147–148, 154, 158–160, 165, 166, 169, 172 n. 135, 176, 183 n. 174, 197, 230 n. 102, 295, 299
- Contra curiositatem studentium*, 64, 148
- On the Word of Glory*, 166
- Grünwalder, Johannes, 145
- Haubst, Rudolf, 41 n. 137, 53 n. 1, 54 n. 6, 56 n. 15, 58 n. 23, 61 n. 43, 63 nn. 51, 87 n. 127
- hearing, faith as, 100–101, 103, 117, 133, 157–158, 239, 260–262, 267, 278
- Heidelberg, University of, 6, 51
- heresy, 51–52, 56, 59–60, 63, 72, 87 n. 127, 102, 107, 197, 213, 279
- Hoenen, Maarten, 4 n. 4, 5 n. 5, 10 n. 23, 51 n. 1, 53 nn. 2, 4, 54 n. 5, 66 n. 66, 69 n. 71, 87 n. 128, 88 n. 129, 171 n. 128, 204 n. 10, 230 n. 102, 237 n. 1
- hope, 39, 52, 238, 240, 271, 273–274, 276
- idolatry, 163, 250, 257, 295
- Incarnation, 8, 31–33, 39, 42, 122 n. 233, 210, 237 n. 1, 248 n. 30, 252

- intellective mystical theology, 158 n. 83,  
197, 253, 276  
*Isaiah* 7:9, 21, 26, 40, 251, 268, 277, 295  
Izbicki, Thomas, 6 n. 6, 53 n. 8, 60 n. 36,  
137 n. 1, 201 n. 2, 237 n. 1, 238 n. 3
- Jaspers, Karl, 33  
Jesus Christ  
  as "citadel" of human reason, 245  
  as *lux mundi*, 245  
  as *lux nobilissima*, 242–243  
Jews, 20, 31, 102, 212 n. 42, 250, 279  
Jubilee indulgence, of, 149–150
- Keck, Johannes, 62 n. 49, 139 n. 8, 140–141,  
145, 154 n. 76, 181  
  *Ecclesiasticus unitor*, 140 n. 17, 145  
Kempf, Nikolaus, 138 nn. 3, 5, 142 n. 27, 183  
  n. 174, 196  
Köln, University of, 47 n. 160, 51 n. 1,  
70 n. 76, 92 n. 141, 107 n. 186  
Kremer, Klaus, 7, 37, 40, 44–46, 47 n. 161,  
277–278
- Leinkauf, Thomas, 13, 38, 40  
Lentzen-Deis, Wolfgang, 35–36  
Leuven, University of, 107 n. 186  
Lollard, Lollardian, 67 n. 67  
Luke, the Apostle, 240, 245  
Lull, Raymond, 26  
  *lux mundi*, 302
- Marsilius of Inghen, 6, 8 n. 18  
Martin, Dennis, 139 n. 10, 146 n. 45, 154  
  n. 76  
Mary, virgin, 269–270  
Meier-Oeser, Stephan, 139 n. 7, 162 n. 95  
Melk, Benedictine monastery of, 139–141,  
142 n. 28, 147–148, 159, 169, 176, 288, 309  
Miller, Clyde Lee, 188 n. 187, 232–234  
  *moderni*, 4, 6, 69 n. 71, 70 n. 76, 174, 302  
Moffitt Watts, Pauline, 6 n. 7, 110 n. 199,  
115, 116 n. 217, 131, 223 n. 81, 225 nn. 86,  
88, 224, 252 n. 39, 255 n. 52  
  *murus paradisi*, 192 n. 199  
Muslims, 20
- Neoplatonism, Neoplatonic, 3, 16, 171, 202  
  n. 4, 204, 234, 275  
Nicholas V, Pope, 59, 119, 150, 152 n. 66, 304  
nominalism, nominalist, 6, 34  
non-contradiction, law of, 8, 9, 27, 64, 72,  
83, 85, 100–101, 203, 216–217, 222, 228,  
230, 231–232, 280
- Ockham, William of, 224–225  
Offermann, Ulrich, 23 n. 64, 36, 37, 40, 203
- Papler, Thomas (Prior of Aggsbach), 146,  
175, 307  
Parmenides, 109 n. 194, 201 n. 1  
Parreut, Johannes, 224 n. 84  
Participation, doctrine of, 16, 275  
*Pater luminum*, 242–243  
Paul, the Apostle, 22, 159, 211, 250, 272  
Peripatetic, Parapetetics, 118–119, 128, 227  
Pius II, Pope (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini),  
53 n. 10  
Plato, 90, 119, 128, 130–131, 213–215,  
226–228, 230, 234  
  Platonic dialogues, 105  
  Platonists, 31, 206, 225–226  
  realm of forms, 215  
  *posse ipsum*, 13, 234  
  *poss-est*, 234  
  power of judgment. *See vis iudiciaria*  
  *primum intellectum*, 271–272  
Proclus, 97 n. 158, 201, 202 n. 4, 227  
Pseudo-Dionysius, 87 n. 127, 90 n. 136, 97  
  n. 158, 99, 147, 158–162, 164, 169, 172–173,  
178–179, 182, 183 n. 174, 184, 186–188, 201,  
274–275, 297  
  *Letter 1 to Gaius Therapeutes*, 160 n. 91  
  *Mystical Theology*, 161  
Pythagoras, 9 n. 20, 12 n. 34, 29, 109 n. 194,  
227
- ratio and intellectus*, 9, 10, 45, 101, 159 n. 85,  
245  
Reformation, 5, 8 n. 16, 59 n. 31, 147 n. 52,  
152, 197  
Renaissance, 34, 280  
Resurrection, 264–265  
Revelation, 42, 70, 119 n. 227  
Roth, Ulli, 7, 38, 229
- Schlitpacher, John, 138, 140–143, 145, 146,  
149–151, 158–159, 165, 169, 172–176, 177  
  n. 157, 178 nn. 159, 163, 179 nn. 162–164,  
180 n. 166, 182 n. 171, 184 n. 175, 186 n.  
182, 196, 287 n. 1, 294–295, 302, 306–307,  
309  
Scotus, Duns, 224 n. 84  
Sigismund of Austria, Duke, 61, 144, 169, 171  
*simplices*, 157, 261 n. 69  
Socrates, 29, 90, 106, 207 n. 23, 219  
Sonnenburg, Abbey of, 143, 144 n. 33, 171  
  n. 129  
soteriology, 40, 254 n. 49, 255 n. 52

- Sprenger, Marquard, 137–138, 140 n. 17, 142, 145, 151, 158 n. 83, 165, 169–170, 172–173, 197, 299  
*Apologia elucidatorii mysticae theologiae*, 145 n. 43  
*Complementum Elucidatorii*, 145 n. 43  
*Elucidatorium mysticae theologiae*, 145, 165
- Stammkötter, Franz-Bernhard, 202 n. 5, 229–230, 231 n. 104
- Stieber, Joachim, 55 nn. 9, 11, 56 nn. 13–14, 139 n. 9, 147 n. 51, 152, 153 n. 70  
*stultitia*, 108, 266  
*synderesis*, 154, 158 n. 83
- the will, 8, 86, 164, 238, 254, 266–267, 269, 271, 273–274, 276
- Thurner, Martin, 43, 203, 207 n. 28, 229 n. 101, 273 n. 95, 278 n. 108  
*Tractatus cuiusdam Cartusiensis de Mystica Theologia* (Treatise contra Gerson), 287–288
- Trinity, the, 8, 14, 20 n. 56, 27 n. 76, 28 n. 78, 30–32, 75–76, 93–94, 137, 173 n. 135, 206, 227
- universals, 67, 116 n. 218, 126, 127 n. 249, 128, 222–225, 228
- Verbum abbreviatum*, 211–212  
*Verbum Dei*, 212, 226 n. 90, 243–244, 248, 278
- Via antiqua*, 6, 47 n. 160, 69–70, 135, 171  
*Via moderna*, 5, 47 n. 160, 56 n. 12
- Vienna, Concordat of, 152
- Vienna, University of, 57 n. 18, 138 n. 5, 139–141, 142 n. 27, 143, 145–148, 152 nn. 66, 69, 174, 302
- vis iudiciaria*, 130–131, 251–252, 262, 280–281
- Waging, Bernard of, 91 n. 138, 137 nn. 1–2, 138, 140, 142–145, 147, 153, 159, 177, 181, 238, 253, 287, 295  
*De cognoscendo Deum*, 144  
*Defensorium laudatorii doctae ignorancie*, 173  
*Laudatorium doctae ignorancie*, 91 n. 138, 153, 166, 309  
*Speculum pastorum*, 144
- Waldensians, 67 n. 67, 176
- Watanabe, Morimichi, 55 nn. 7, 9–10, 59 n. 31, 60 n. 36, 144 n. 33, 204 nn. 13–14
- Wenck, Johannes, 1, 2, 51–108, 110 n. 198, 111, 115 n. 216, 117, 130, 134–135, 137–138, 142, 149, 155, 157–158, 163, 176, 180–181, 182, 185–186, 194, 198, 201, 202 n. 5, 213, 230, 232, 279, 280, 291, 309  
*De ignota litteratura*, 1, 52 n. 4, 54, 56, 58, 62–64, 71–72, 81, 85, 87 n. 127, 88–89, 90 n. 134, 92, 104, 130, 309
- Wilsnack, Bleeding host at, 59 n. 31, 60
- Wydemann, Leopold, 146, 287 n. 1, 309
- Zachaeus, 240